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DIME
THE LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE
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GUN THIS MAN DOWN!
by LEWIS B. PATTEN
ROE RICHMOND
J. T. LYNCH
MANY OTHERS!
REWARD

Build a Fine Business . . . Full or Spare Time!

I'll Put a "Shoe Store Business" in Your Pocket!

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As the Mason Shoe Counselor handling the quick-selling line of this 50-year old, million-dollar company you have a limitless market, because everybody wears shoes. Start by selling to relatives, friends, neighbors. That will prove the fine quality leathers—superb craftsmanship—money-saving value—and unequalled comfort-fit! Then branch out on a big scale.

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SEND NOW!

I have a powerful Selling Outfit I'm going to send you absolutely FREE as soon as I receive your coupon. This outfit includes actual 10-second demonstrator, famous Automatic Selling Plan, and features exclusive Velvet-Eez Air-Cushion shoes, fine jackets—other fast-selling specialties. To take advantage of this opportunity of your life, rush me the coupon below NOW! You'll be glad you did!

SEND FOR FREE OUTFIT

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Matt Hurst rode back to Granada town to claim a bloody boothill heritage, and carry out a kinsman's command—issued from beyond the grave!

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—And—

In the Saddle ..... A Department **6**

Longridin' Lawman ..... Harry Van Demark **47**

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IN THE SADDLE

A MAN can meet up with a pack of jaspers who will chew the fat about life in the Old West—and, twenty to one, the yarns they spin are tall windies! But there's one old-timer who'll tell it straight, and you can bet your bottom buck on it! He's Walt Coburn, a man by now almost a legend to thousands of American men and boys. Here's a little dope by Walt, himself, on his boy-into-manhood days:

The Great Falls Meat Company was holding a little bunch of beef steers on the north side of the Missouri River, a few miles back in the hills from a little Honyo settlement called Little Chicago, on the smelter side.

Daybreak one morning, before the first street car crossed the Fifteenth Street suspension bridge, the cowhands working for the meat company crowded the steers onto the bridge. I think Dick Bodkin was in charge of the herd, but the man who rode in the lead, ahead of the cattle, was a stranger. A black-haired man who rode a long stirrup.

Once the cattle got started across the bridge, the clatter of their own hoofs spooked them. The bridge, packed from rail to rail with running cattle started to sway from side to side like a cradle.

I'd driven out in the buggy with my father and we were the only ones there that early in the morning, except for Charlie Russell who was setting his horse alongside our rig. I was just a kid then, but it was a sight I never forgot. The cowhand in the lead had his horse wide open and the lead steers were blowing slobber on his tail, and from where we were we could see the narrow bridge swinging back and forth.

A couple of young would-be cowboys fetching up the drags turned back, but the black-haired feller in the lead yanked down his hat and you could see his white teeth bared as he stood high in his stirrups, his ketch rope coiled in his hand. He had his hand on the saddle-horn and now and then he'd cut a look back to see how close the lead steers were crowding the rump of his horse. It was so close there wasn't room to spit.

When the drag end was clear of the bridge the black-headed feller held up the leaders, and they got the cattle stopped and grazing.

The black-haired gent loped over to our rig. He was a six foot man with his pants legs shoved in his boot tops. As handsome a looking man in a black-haired, gray-eyed way as you'd want to see. He had a habit of standing in his stirrups like he was in a hurry to get there and his horse was traveling too slow. He pulled up and reached for his cigarette makings. He called my father by name, and said. "I'm Jake Myers, from the Indian Territory. I want to hire out to the Circle C."

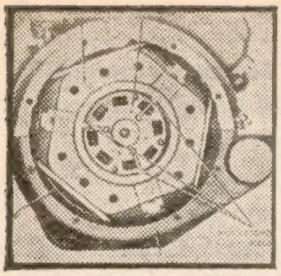
"I'll be at the Park Hotel in town after supper," my old man said. "We kin talk it over. But from the way you handled those cattle, you got a job."

"I left the missus and yearlin' kid back in Oklahoma. I'd like to fetch them to Montana, but I don't have the railroad fare—"

"I'll give you the money to send for them tonight."

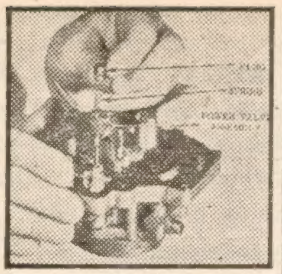
I remember I was wearing one of those little round caps the high school freshmen wear. It was a new red cap and I was shore proud of it. I sat there on the seat alongside my father who always wore a beard.

(Continued on page 8)

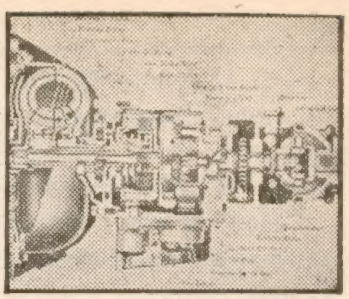


Cut-away diagrams make every operation easy. Above — Ford clutch.

Diagrams, tables and text take the "mystery" out of all ignition systems.



You get illustrated repair procedures for all types of carburetors.



Buick Dynaflow. Book crammed with 2500 diagrams, photos, cutaway pictures (of which these are mere miniatures) that show every part in detail. *ALL* automatic transmissions are fully covered.

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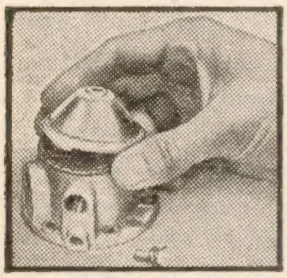
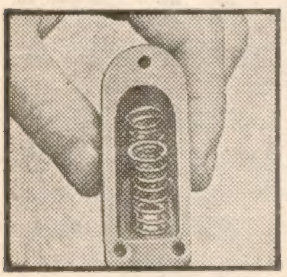


Fuel pumps can cause trouble. Pictures show exactly how to take them apart, fix them.



No guesswork. Clear pictures show how to fix water pump, generator, brakes, chokes, etc.

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Frazer		Willys

(Continued from page 6)

I'd been brought up to speak only when spoken to. I saw this Oklahoma Jake grin at me. I grinned back.

"That's a hell of a looking thing for a cowman's son to wear on his head." Jake grinned at me.

I turned red. I felt like crawling off and dying alone, I was that ashamed. At the same time I was mad enough to bawl and I was thinking if I had a gun I'd shoot that grin off his face.

He loped off to where Dick Bodkin was talking to Charlie Russell, and I drove back to town with my dad.

I didn't want to go with my dad to the Park Hotel that night after supper, but I did. We were sitting on the big porch that looked out over the park when the tall cowhand came up the steps. He had a sack of candy in his hand. I had on the new Stetson hat my father bought me each June to wear at the ranch.

"Good thing you throwed away that jellybean lid." Jake poked me in the ribs and shoved the sack of candy at me.

I was looking at the six-shooter shoved into the waistband of his pants. He was from the Indian Territory, from what had been the Cherokee Strip, he was saying. He had the straight black hair and high cheekbones of a Cherokee. Most everybody figured he was part Indian. I never heard him deny it. He never admitted it. He never said so, one way or another.

Right now I watched him, bug-eyed, and listened to everything he said. For all his joshing me, his talk with my father was strictly business. He was hired on the spot and for better than common wages. Inside a year he was running the wagon and he gradually worked into the job of general ramrod of the big Circle C outfit. He kept that job until we sold out to the Matadors in 1915. My father was a good judge of horses, cattle and men. He hired a natural when he took Jake Myers on.

Jake loved kids. But at the same time he deviled the life out of every youngster he met. But no matter how hard you tried, you couldn't stay mad at Jake. He'd josh you out of it.

I NEVER saw Jake when he didn't have a gun on him. He didn't wear it for show. It was a part of him and he would have felt naked without it. He was never quarrelsome. So far as I know he never shot anybody. But I watched him hit a man with a gun barrel so's he stayed hit.

Jake hired out about the time things were getting a little rough around the edges. The Circle C was said to be a tough cow outfit to work for, and the Little Rockies country was a tough cow country. It was the stomping ground for Kid Curry and his brothers who worked for the outfit at one time or another, like most of the old Hole-in-the-Wall gang and the Wild Bunch. Jake fitted in with it all.

The Circle C was having its share of trouble, first with the sheepmen and then the homesteaders and the dry land farmers, and the trouble lasted up to the time we sold out to the Matadors.

Jake liked to take me along, because, even though I was a growing kid, I knew how to keep my mouth shut and I'd do what he told me to do. I've been in more than a few tights with Jake. Times when I was scared, but I was more scared of showing it in front of Jake. Mebbyso that's what kept me from rabbiting when Jake took it for granted I'd be there.

But when I went wild of my own accord, it was Jake who took my part against my father and two oldest brothers, Bob and Will, who rode hell out of me until I'd bow my neck and quit the flats. I'd stand it, three-four months, working eighteen-twenty hours out of the twenty-four, then I'd saddle a horse and pull out. I'd cut the telephone line both ways, from Landusky and Zortman in the Little Rockies, to Malta, on the railroad. I packed a gun and rode

(Continued on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

broncs and wanted to be tough. I was always talking about throwing in with the Wild Bunch, and if I didn't show up in Zortman, Landusky or Malta, Jake knew he'd find me at the Jim Thornhill place. Jim and Kid Curry (Harvey Logan) were pardners, and I was always welcome there.

When Jake would find me after I'd been gone a week or two, he'd take me back to the ranch and tell Bob and Will and the Old Gent, as he called my father, to let me alone. That's why I always knew Jake would stand at my back till my belly caved in. And then he'd turn right around and get me into a jackpot that concerned the Circle C, and there for a few years we rode in pairs.

On the home ranch, or on the roundup, Jake worked the hell out of us. He never slacked off or gave himself the best of it. He never ate breakfast, but he'd walk around with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, restless like, while we'd wolf our morning grub a few hours before daybreak. Jake was the coffee-drinkinest man I ever knew. When we'd ride up to a ranch we'd never been to before, Jake would go into the kitchen hunting his coffee. If there wasn't a pot of it sitting back on the stove, he made it himself.

Jake joshed the men under him and treated them like he was a common cowhand. But he got more work out of a crew of cowhands than any other boss I ever knew. When he'd trot off on a long morning circle, high trotting without letting up, you'd have to be a real cowhand to follow him on the circle. I never heard him holler enough.

Jake's education was limited. He misspelled a lot of small words, but he had a head for figures and a shrewd brain that could out-think and out-figure men with college educations. He always figured the other man was out to get the best of him and he tried to out-smart him from the start. And chances are, he did.

When it looked like there was bound to be a range war, Jake would saddle his horse and shove a .30-30 into his scabbard and ride off. Usually he'd take me along.

"They'll think twice before they'll kill a kid," Jake would grin. "In case anything happens to me, you hightail it back to the ranch. If I get killed, see to it that they hang whoever kills me."

"I would ride along, standing in my short stirrups, all swelled up with pride, and the .45 gun I had shoved into the waistband of my overalls rubbing callouses on my hipbone. I've never known more prideful hours than those I rode with Jake on his prowls. Night and day meant nothing. Strong black coffee kept us wide awake. Looking back on it now, Jake had more than his share of guts and the shrewd calculating brain to back the gun he packed.

FIRST year Jake run the wagon, the Old Gent told him to make a cowhand out of me. He put me on day herd, on cocktail guard and on last guard. He really poured it on and the boys ribbed me into quitting. I bowed up, forty miles from nowhere. I caught my Snowflake pony and bunched 'er. I was headed yonderly a little after daybreak when Jake rode up. "Where do you figger you're goin', button?"

I was bawling mad. "I've stood all the dirt I'm going to take . . . I'm headed for the home ranch."

"Suit yourself," Jake told me. "But you're headed the wrong way. You'll be acrost the Canadian line by dark."

"I ain't lost," I lied.

"Suit yourself." He loped away and out of sight. He headed me off a little after sunrise. "I got a string of Texas horses for you," he said. "Little ponies about your size. I'm taking you off dayherd. The Old Gent said I was to make a cowhand out of you. You'd shore look purty ridin' to the home ranch and tellin' him you couldn't take it."

(Continued on page 12)

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(Continued from page 10)

I rode back to camp with Jake. I always did. If I wasn't a cowhand, it wasn't Jake's fault. He was a top hand and he tried to pattern me after his ways. Jake always claimed he did a good job. I don't know. I done my best. He did the bragging.

I remember the time back at the ranch, when his wife Janie had bought some setting hens. One of the hens hid her nest and Janie spent a lot of time prowling the brush along Dry Beaver hunting it.

There was a three-holer near the office. One morning I was in there and I could hear Jake telling Janie, loud enough for me to hear, that the hen had made her nest on some old newspapers in the out-house and that she'd better move the setting hen. I sat there with both legs propped against the door, too scared to holler out. When Janie found the door shut tight from the inside, she broke into a run, and Jake was laughing loud enough to be heard a mile.

Jake's daughter Cecil was a few years younger than me. Jake would coax me into their private dining room off the kitchen to eat with them. About the time we tied into the grub, Jake would commence his horrawing. Janie would try to hush him up but it only made matters worse.

When the Circle C sold to the Matadors, Ben Phillips, a sheepman, took Jake in as a pardner in the sheep business. Jake knew sheep like he knew cattle, because the last five years or so our outfit had to run some sheep to protect our big range. Jake made the sheep business pay. He had his hand in a lot of things and made a couple of good-sized fortunes.

I LOST track of Jake when I left Montana, but now and then I'd get word about him from men who drifted into Arizona from the north. A few years before he died he showed up at my place in Tucson. Jake hadn't changed. But I had. I wasn't a forty-a-month cowhand any more. My horns had been sawed off down to the nubbin', and I was getting gray-headed.

Jake couldn't get used to it. I'd ketch him looking at me while we sat around, like he was trying to figure me out. He had calculated on finding me like I was when he last saw me, still pretty much of a kid.

Long after my wife had gone to bed Jake and I sat on the porch, drinking coffee and smoking and talking. His hair was snow white now but he still walked the floor, restless, a cup of coffee in his hand, the bulge of his gun showing. Jake was never a boozer, but he liked to gamble. He'd gamble on anything.

Jake had traveled a few thousand miles to talk to me, to tell me some things I never knew for sure. He said when he was dead and gone I could tell it in the yarns I wrote. But knowing all the time I never would.

Jake always kept a room at the Great Northern Hotel at Malta, Montana. He had a standing bet with 'Dolly' Pearson, who owned the livery and feed barn, and who was about Jake's age, on which of them would die first. Jake lost the bet by a few days, I heard. The barn man died a week later.

"That grizzly son beat me to it," Pearson said when Jake died, and took his morning drink alone. The lonesomeness was inside him.

Jake Myers never knew that he was making a legend, centered around the Circle C home ranch, the outfit he ramrodded during the years I was growing into manhood, before the barb wire fenced the open range.

I can hear Jake giving the Old Gent and my brothers Bob and Will, the news, after he'd asked Saint Peter at the gate where he kept the coffee.

"The kid turned out all right, after all. Makin' better'n wages writin' stories. I kept tellin' you all along, he was worth savin'. If it hadn't bin for me, he'd died in the pen, makin' horsehair bridles!"

And the hell of it was, Jake died believing just that. *—Walt Coburn*

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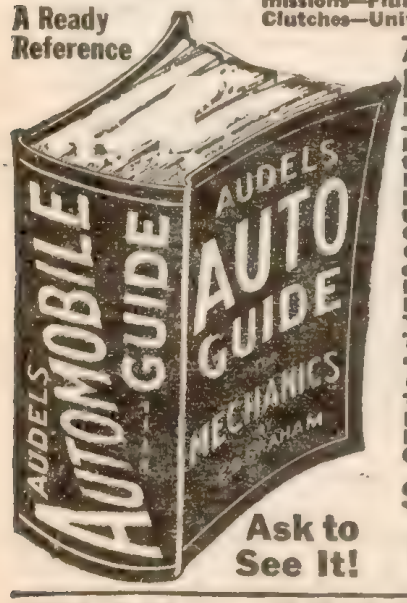

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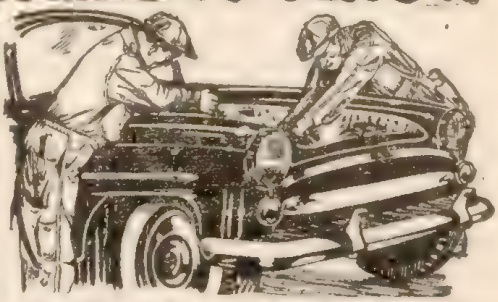

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HE TAMED THE OVERLAND TRAIL!

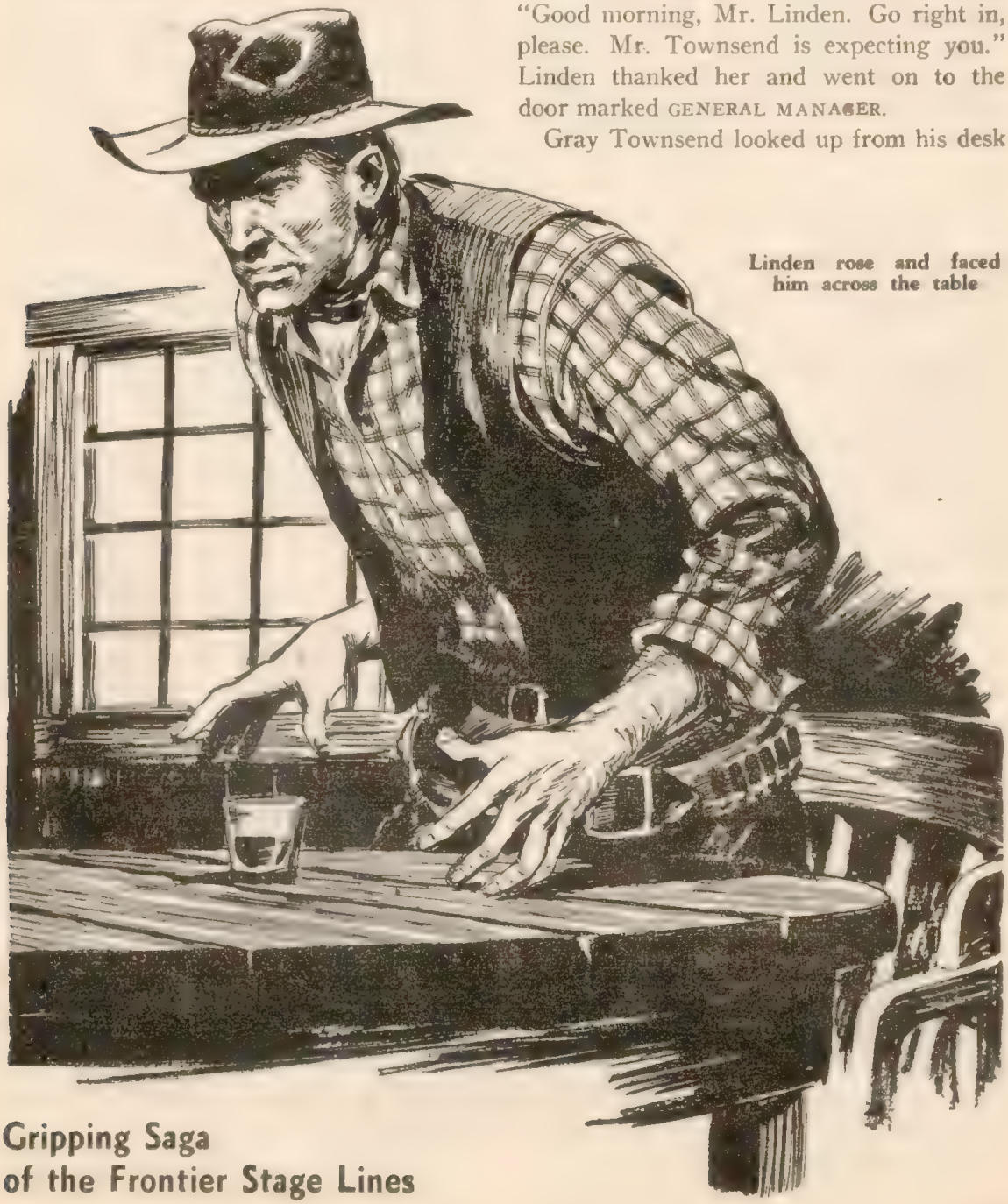
By ROE RICHMOND

Strange, indeed, is the crimson tale of Trouble-shooter Swade: Cowman friend and nester foe he gunned alike; left loyal wife and only son to face his vigilante lynchers—then even double-crossed the rangeland hunter who finally killed him!

LINDEN had a sense of foreboding as he approached the Overland Stage Line's home office. He'd been hearing rumors and dreading this summons. It was bound to concern Swade. Well, there was a limit to what Linden would do, even for Overland, and going after Swade was beyond that limit.

The girl in the outer office smiled up at the tall young man with extra warmth. "Good morning, Mr. Linden. Go right in, please. Mr. Townsend is expecting you." Linden thanked her and went on to the door marked GENERAL MANAGER.

Gray Townsend looked up from his desk



Linden rose and faced him across the table

Gripping Saga of the Frontier Stage Lines

with a cordial smile of welcome. "Hello, Lin. Have a chair and make yourself comfortable, son."

Linden sat down, accepted a cigar, and leaned back to light it with his long legs stretched out, his lean, rangy frame relaxed.

Townsend resumed leafing through the sheaf of papers on the flat, polished desk, his gray head and ruddy face bent intently. He looked like an executive now, well-groomed, tailored and pressed, his pleated linen shirt a flawless white beneath the string tie.

Gray Townsend hadn't always been a deskman. He had pioneered the Overland Line with Linden's father, when this country was really rough. He still lived with a chew of tobacco lumping one clean-shaven cheek, an incongruous note that always pleased Linden. Without that chew Townsend might have seemed like a stranger, too dignified for comfort.

"Any idea what this call is about, Lin?" he asked, making a final notation and pushing back the papers.

"Afraid so, Gray," Linden drawled, puffing on the cigar.

Townsend sighed. "Yes, it's Swade again. This time he's gone too far. We can't tolerate him any longer, Lin. He's got to go—in spite of the fine work he did for us in the beginning."

"What's happened to Swade anyway, Gray?"

Townsend brushed a large hand over his gray crest. "It's hard to say, Lin. The times have changed and Swade hasn't, I guess. Once we needed a man like Swade. Nobody else could have done it. Swade couldn't have done what he did, without the wild streak that's in him. Now things are different. We don't need a killer out there any more. And Swade refuses to accept civilization."

"Maybe he can't," Linden said.

"Maybe that's so," Townsend admitted. "But whatever it is, Swade's got to be removed. He's outlived his usefulness and become a menace. I know this sounds cold-blooded, Lin, but when you hear what Swade's been up to—"

"I've heard some pretty weird stories. Just what is going on out there in the Rocky Ridge division?"

"Swade's gone bad, all bad. He's running around with a wild bunch; men like Cusack and Gibbons, no good whatever. They get drunk and hooraw towns along the line, and even bust up our own stations. They beat up or shoot down anybody who gets in their way. They ride horses into saloons and stores and wreck the places. The law doesn't dare touch Swade and those other gunnies, so it's up to us, Lin."

"Nancy can't do anything with Swade?"

"Apparently not. And we're responsible, because Swade's our agent. He's got to be stopped, and we've got to do it, Lin."

Linden moved his head slowly from side to side. "Not me, Gray. Not against Swade. Why, he practically raised me in Julesburg. He taught me everything I know about guns and horses and the stage business."

"It's your job, son," Townsend reminded gently.

"I can't do it, Gray," Linden said. "It's the one job I can't do for you and Overland."

Townsend's expression was kind and patient. "I know how you feel, Lin. I know all about you and Swade. But this isn't the man you used to know and love, son. Swade's gone mad with drink and power and killing. He kills now for pure pleasure and excitement. Once it served a worthwhile purpose. Now it just feeds the ego and madness in him. Swade's killed so much he thinks he's God."

"That's hard to believe, Gray," Linden said, staring at the cigar that had gone dead in his hand.

"Sure, it's hard to believe. It was hard for me to accept it. But it's true, Lin, absolutely true. Swade's giving this company

a bad name, all the way from here to the Coast. We've got to get rid of him."

"You mean—kill him?"

Townsend shook his gray head. "Not necessarily. We're willing to pension him off, if he'll resign and pull out of this country."

"Swade won't do that," Linden murmured.

"Afraid not, but it's a fair enough offer. A living wage for him and his family for life."

LINDEN didn't seem to hear. "Swade thinks the Rocky Ridge is his, just as he used to feel that the Julesburg division was his. He went in and cleaned them both up, where no other man could have. Swade opened the line and kept it running."

Townsend gestured a bit irritably, but his voice was mild. "I know all that, son, but it doesn't alter the present situation. We no longer need a gunfighter on the Rocky Ridge, especially an indiscriminate killer like Swade. It's been murder in several cases; he doesn't even give his victims a chance lately. Swade seems to think that codes and laws don't apply to him at all. I'm sending you out there, Lin."

"I won't go, Gray," Linden said. "I'm sorry but I can't do it. If you want my resignation—"

"You're our top trouble-shooter, son. We need you, as much as we used to need your dad in the old days. You grew up with Overland, Lin, the way your father wanted you to. We don't want it to end this way, do we?"

"No. Overland's been mighty good to me, Gray," said Linden, deeply troubled. "But I can't go against Swade. He was like a big brother or another father to me, after Dad died."

"You can go and talk to him, Lin."

Linden smiled sadly. "On that subject, it would wind up in trouble. I guess you know that, Gray."

"I'm afraid of that. But it can't be helped. It's got to be done."

"Not by me," Linden said flatly, flicking a match with his thumbnail and relighting the cigar. "I'm not afraid of Swade. I think maybe I could take him, seeing as he's older and drinking so much now. But a man doesn't go after his brother with a gun."

Townsend's face hardened. "If his brother turns renegade he might have to. You heard about Swade slaughtering that half-breed family?"

"I couldn't quite swallow it though."

"It was true. You heard what he did to Jourdenais?"

"I didn't believe that either," Linden said. "You know how stories grow and twist over the miles."

"It happened just the way you heard it," Townsend said grimly. "He left Jourdenais tied to a backyard post all night long, and it was freezing cold up in the mountains. In the morning Swade went out to execute him, but he didn't finish him quick and easy. Swade just started shooting around Jourdenais, clipping his ears and burning his hide and shooting off his fingers. Then Swade broke both arms and both legs, before he finally killed the man. And cut off his ears afterward."

"Not the Swade I know," Linden protested.

"It's not the Swade you know, Lin," Townsend declared. "He's gone crazy, turned into a murdering madman. Can't you understand that?"

"No, I reckon I can't, Gray."

"All right, then," Townsend said, with somber finality. "What did the Rivards mean to you, Lin?"

"Why, they took me in, gave me a home, treated me like one of the family. When you put me on the payroll, they didn't even want to take any money for my board and room, but I made 'em take it. Nobody ever used a kid better than the Rivards did me. But why, Gray?"

"The Rivards are dead," Townsend said slowly. "Swade killed them. He heard that Rivard had said something about him, his drinking and abusing his wife and getting mean and vicious. Swade went to the house late at night, drunk, I suppose, and called Rivard to the door. He shot Rivard down on the doorstep, threw him back inside, poured coal-oil around, and set fire to the place. None of them got out, Lin. Rivard and his wife and the three kids died in there."

Linden swore softly and went rigid in the chair. "Is that a fact, Gray?"

"Would I lie to you about it, Lin?"

Linden stood up and paced the floor, suffering on his bleak face. Townsend watched him with sober sympathy, strong jaws barely moving on the tobacco. The boy was tall, lithe and easy-moving, and he had the clean, strong features and figure of his father, although he lacked Big Lin's brawn and bulk. A fine lad, Townsend thought. Old Lin would sure be proud if he could see the kid now. A chip off the old block, all right, cut slimmer and finer but fully as tough.

"Well, son?" Gray Townsend said, as Linden finally wheeled to face him.

"I'll go, Gray," Linden said simply.

RIDING the westbound stagecoach and checking the stations along the route, Linden's thoughts went back to boyhood in Julesburg and his earliest memories of the man named Swade. When Gray Townsend and the elder Linden and other pioneers established the Overland Stage Line, there had been Cheyennes and Sioux to fight, but it was later that white outlaws led by Monk Moquin had killed Big Lin.

Orphaned on the frontier, his mother having disappeared some years ago, Linden went to live with Rivard, head hostler at the Overland depot in Julesburg. The boy started working around the stables under Rivard's tutelage, shoveling manure, sweeping floors, tending stock, greasing axles, mending harness, repairing equipment and running errands, learning the business from the bottom up. In deference to his father, Linden was placed on the payroll at a fair wage, even before he was able to earn his keep. Townsend, having worked and fought beside Big Lin, figured that the boy would be a good investment for the company.

Linden had been in the early teens then, and the Rivards couldn't have been kinder and more generous to their own son, even though they had infant children of their own to care for at the same time. Rivard and his wife had both worshiped Big Lin, and nothing was too good for his boy in their minds and hearts. It had been a pleasant childhood, even though Linden never got over missing and grieving for his dad, but the Overland Stage Line was being hit hard by marauding bandits. It was on the brink of bankruptcy and ruin.

Then Swade came, to take over as agent of the Julesburg division, and the outlaws found themselves up against a far different proposition in him than in Jourdenais, the deposed agent.

Swade was a gunfighter in the old tradition, lightning-fast and fearless, cold, sure and deadly, scornful of odds against him. Swade was medium-sized and compact, trim, graceful and rather handsome, with his tawny head, clear blue eyes, fine-cut features, and easy, gentle smile. A mild-mannered, soft-spoken man, until he was aroused or drunk, Swade had a winning way and a lot of charm about him. He immediately became Linden's Number One Hero, displacing Gray Townsend and Rivard, and even, to some extent, the memory of Lin's father. Swade in turn took a quick liking to Linden, and spent hours teaching the boy to handle guns and horses.

When Jourdenais questioned his removal from the agency, Swade said quietly, "You failed here. You're either a crook or a coward—or both. Get out while you can, mister."

"I don't take that from any man," Jourdenais said. "I'm staying until I see you dead, Swade, and that shouldn't be too long."

"Keep out of my way then," Swade advised. "I don't want to see you around. And don't get any ideas about shooting me in the back either. A lot of men have tried that. They're all dead now."

It didn't take Swade long to put an end to the stage holdups and stock-stealing, to kill or rout the worst of the bandits and restore peace, order and safety to the division. In a Julesburg saloon, he shot to death two boastful badmen, and out on the road with a small posse Swade wiped out a whole gang of robbers, as they attempted to stick up a stagecoach. When a stage station was attacked, Swade and his men ran down the raiders, shooting three of them and hanging the four wounded survivors on the spot.

Monk Moquin was still at large with a handful of men, after most of the owlhoots had been buried or had fled the territory, but Swade promised to get this last bunch before long. And he did. Alone on the trail of some stolen Overland horses, Swade came upon a cabin in which Moquin and three other thieves were at rest, their mounts and the stolen stock outside. Dismounting and creeping up to the shack with both guns drawn, Swade kicked in the door and opened fire, going in through the smoke to finish the battle.

When the guns ceased blasting, two outlaws were dead and another dying, while Moquin was down with two bulletholes in his body and his gunhand almost shot off at the wrist. Swade cut off the mangled hand, seared the stump with a hot iron, plugged the holes, and lashed Moquin into the saddle to take him back with the stock. Moquin lived long enough to reach Julesburg and make a confession, which included the murder of Big Lin. Swade was getting ready to hang him when Moquin finally died.

HAVING avenged the death of Linden's father, Swade became more of a hero than ever to the lanky boy. The Julesburg division, long known as the worst on the entire Overland Trail, was pretty well cleaned up after the Moquin crew was rubbed out, and by this time Swade's fame had spread all over the West. He was courting Nancy Harding, daughter of the town's M.D., much against the doctor's wishes, and Nancy couldn't see any other man. Which seemed perfectly logical to Linden, if not to old Doc Harding. They made a striking couple, Swade light and Nancy dark-haired.

Lin didn't see how any woman could resist Swade, and he liked Nancy—for a girl—even though he resented the time Swade spent with her, when they might have been talking or riding or shooting together. But Linden supposed that having a girl was part of growing up. One of the most unattractive parts, to his adolescent mind. Still, if a man had to have a girl, he couldn't do much better than Nancy. She could ride and shoot, as well as cook and keep house. She always looked pretty and smelled clean and sweet, and you could talk to her about thing almost like a man.

Linden was riding with Swade the day they found the Overland horses in a canyon near the claim Jourdenais had filed and built a homestead on.

"Always figured he was crooked. Now I know it for sure," Swade said. They drove the horses into the yard and Jourdenais came to the doorway of the soddy with his shotgun.

"I don't know anything about them horses," Jourdenais said. "You're trying to frame something on me, Swade. Get off my place before I give you both barrels of buckshot."

"Make a move with that shotgun and you're dead," Swade told him. "I'll give you till sundown tomorrow to pull out of here. If you aren't gone by then, I'll either kill you or throw you in jail."

They rode out with the stage horses, and Linden kept expecting to hear that scattergun roar behind them, but Jourdenais just stood there in front of the sod house swearing and raving about Swade's thinking he could run the whole country and tromp all over everybody in it. Swade, he said, seemed to think he was God Almighty Himself.

The next day Linden heard that Jourdenais was in town with his shotgun looking for Swade, and that Swade was stalking the streets hunting for Jourdenais. When Lin finished work at the station barn that afternoon, he stopped at Markham's store for a bottle of soda pop. Swade sauntered in as Lin was draining the bottle, and then Jourdenais loomed in the entrance behind him with that shotgun.

Linden tried to yell a warning, but Swade was already spinning around to face the doorway. The shotgun belched flame with a bellowing roar, and the blast flung Swade back upon the counter, spilling cans and bundles to the floor. But Swade's right-hand Colt was out, lined and blazing at Jourdenais, jumping as the shots streaked off one after another. The reports blended into thunder that shivered the glassware on the shelves and filled the long, gloomy room.

Jourdenais jerked back with the smashing impacts, crumpling and sagging against the door jamb, then rolling backward to sprawl on the porch with arms and legs outspread. Swade watched him for a moment, bent in the middle with his sandy head drooping over the smoking gun barrel, and then his knees gave and Swade fell forward with his face against the floorboards.

Lin thought both men must be dead, but they were not. A crowd gathered at once, and the wounded men were carried to Doc Harding's. Linden ran ahead to tell the doctor and prepare Nancy against the shock, assuring her that Swade wasn't hurt too bad, although the boy thought he must be nearly torn in two by that close-range charge of buckshot. As it turned out, however, the blast had ripped shallowly through Swade's side between the hipbone and the ribs, and Doc Harding predicted a quick and complete recovery. Jourdenais' wounds were not fatal either.

BOTH men were laid up for a long time, and Swade had many anxious and solicitous visitors from the headquarters of the Overland Stage Company. Jourdenais was out first, still muttering threats against the division agent, but by the time Swade was up, Jourdenais had pulled stakes and vanished from the Julesburg area. Swade had never forgotten.

"I'll get him someday," Swade said quietly. "I'll run across Jourdenais somewhere, and when I do, he's a dead man."

Now, according to Townsend, Jourdenais was dead, but not the way the boy Linden had visualized it, not in a fair standup fight. Cusack and Gibbons had brought Jourdenais in to Rocky Ridge, and left him bound to a post all night in the mountain cold. After breakfast Swade had gone out with cold deliberate brutality, and shot the helpless man to pieces before finally killing him. . . .

About a year after Swade's recovery, he and Nancy Harding were married, and everyone remarked on what a handsome and well-matched pair they were, the bravest man and the loveliest girl in these parts. Young Linden thought he had lost Swade altogether, but Nancy sought the boy out and said, "You haven't lost your big brother, Lin. You've just got yourself a new big sister." And Swade himself came around and said that, as much as he loved Nancy, he wasn't going to let her come between him and his friends like Lin. So everything was all right—at first, anyway.

The Julesburg line was so peaceful that Swade talked about hanging up his guns, but a year or so after the wedding bad trouble broke out on the Rocky Ridge di-

vision. With mining camps mushrooming in the mountains, lawless elements from all over the land converged on the Rocky Ridge strip, and once more the Overland Stage suffered severe losses in stock rustled, coaches held up and property destroyed.

Swade was sent west to take over and clean up the Rocky Ridge strip, as he had the Julesburg, and Nancy insisted on going with him against Swade's wishes. Rivard went along to take charge of the stables and stock, and Linden accompanied the chief hostler, with the Rivard family following a little later.

It took Swade a little over a year to break up and clear out the bandits in the Rocky Ridge sector, and by the end of that time he had killed a half-dozen more men, and had seen many others hanged or imprisoned. Swade was a one-man scourge, a living legend, known and feared throughout the country. These killings were necessary, the victims all deserved death, but Nancy was beginning to revolt against her husband's way of life. It was then that Swade started drinking more, but it never seemed to affect him in those days.

With the outlaws dead, jailed or scattered, the road open and the coaches rolling on schedule, Linden was old enough to begin riding the Overland Line, first as shotgun guard and later driving the six-horse hitches. Swade made some of the early runs with him, teaching Lin all he could about riding shotgun and handling the ribbons and whip. Whatever they were doing, they always had a fine time together.

Then Gray Townsend came out and took Linden back east with him to go to school and to work in the main office. Lin was reluctant to leave Rocky Ridge but everyone —the Rivards and Nancy and even Swade himself—insisted that it was the best thing for him. Linden learned quickly in the classrooms and offices, as he had in the stable and on the stagecoaches.

At twenty, full-grown and matured, he was ready to go to work for the Overland Company. Lin could have had a desk job, with excellent opportunities for rapid advancement, but he preferred working outside with the trouble-shooting crew, under Cap Nagel. He couldn't stand confinement in an office.

NOW, a veteran at twenty-four, Linden was the chief trouble-shooter for Overland, having proved himself time and again in the field and taken over the position after Cap Nagel was shot to death in Denver.

On this trip West Linden inspected every station and talked with the personnel of each, from the manager down to the youngest stable boy. He was well-known, liked and respected along the line, and he found everything in good working order, except in minor instances.

But whenever Swade's name was mentioned, a change came into the eyes and faces of the men present, and Linden began to fear that all the evil things he had heard about Swade were true. Swade had long been a legendary figure on the Overland Line. In the past there had been honor attached to his name, but now it was tarnished and corroded into a symbol of shame and loathing.

It was strange too, reflected Linden, for thanks mainly to Swade, this route was open and clear. Swade had done this—with his magnificent courage and skill. Yet now that the gunsmoke had cleared, Swade had turned bad and become a disgrace, a menace. It was difficult to comprehend, particularly for one who had known Swade as Lin had. But there was no use in trying to solve the mystery, until he had seen and talked with him and others in Rocky Ridge.

The massacre of the Rivard family was one thing that Linden could not accept as yet. He could believe it of Cusack and Gibbons, but not of Swade.

In Julesburg, he discovered that old Doc Harding had died in despair, knowing his daughter Nancy was chained by her own

love to a living hell of unhappiness with Swade. And there was disgust and hatred in every man's eyes when the name of Swade was spoken. It must be true, Linden thought hopelessly. God help Swade, and God help me.

CHAPTER TWO

Trail of the Mad Gun

ROCKING along through the dust and heat in the old Concord, Julesburg was now far behind and the Continental Divide loomed ahead, its snow-capped peaks towering in fabulous grandeur to merge with the white clouds in the clean blue sky.

Another day and they had left the old buffalo plains to climb a winding pass into the Rockies, with tremendous mountains rising on all sides, naked rock spires frosted with year-round snow above the timberline.

They rode through forests of blue spruce and silvery aspen, somber pine and Engelmann's spruce, with magpies scattering in front of the stagecoach and bluejays scolding from the trees.

Linden saw a doe and fawn poised gracefully beside a foaming stream, and glimpsed large-eared mule deer vanishing into a roaring gorge. Coyotes and wolves ranged through the timber, and elk and bighorn sheep were visible on distant heights. A glacial stream in a lush highland valley was banked brilliantly with wild flowers, columbine and Indian paintbrush, gentian and lupine, harebell and larkspur.

The last overnight stop before Rocky Ridge was in the brawling mining camp of Empire City. That evening in the Fancy-Free Saloon, Linden overheard the miners discussing Swade and his sidekicks, Cusack and Gibbons, who had recently paid this settlement a bloody and unforgettable visit. The Vigilantes had decided to capture and hang that trio. Linden introduced himself to the leader of the group, Pine Liggett, and got the story from him.

Swade, Cusack and Gibbons, on one of their spectacular drinking sprees, had ridden into Empire City and taken over the honkytonk operated by Harelip Emma. After beating up and throwing out the other customers, Swade and his partners amused themselves with the terrified dancing girls and went on consuming vast quantities of liquor. As the night progressed, a man was killed and one of the women was wounded.

To culminate the celebration, Swade and his companions drove out the other girls and quirted them through the street. When a bunch of prospectors objected, Swade and his men drew and started shooting, killing two miners and wounding several more. Then they rode out of town, leaving behind them three dead men, five wounded, Harelip Emma's saloon in wreckage and the whole community in turmoil.

"This country's put up with Swade and his kind too damn long," Pine Liggett said solemnly. "Maybe he was a good man once —he must of been. But he's a mad dog now, and he's got to die. We're going after Swade and them two other hyenas tomorrow. Probably some of us'll die in Rocky Ridge, but they'll sure as hell end up shot dead or hung by the neck."

"I'm on my way to fire Swade," Linden said. "I'd like to ask a favor of you men. Give me three days in Rocky Ridge before you move in. By that time Swade will either be gone for good or dead."

There was a prolonged and heated debate in the barroom, with Linden finally convincing Liggett of his sincerity. The Vigilantes agreed to give Linden his three days, perhaps because none of them was too eager to go against Swade's guns, even in overwhelming force. But one man still held out against the majority, a big shag-headed, brute-faced miner named Mattox.

"It won't do no good," Mattox insisted. "Them Overland people always stick together. This young squirt ain't going to side us against a company man, especially against a gun-slinger like Swade. We got

to git Swade ourselves, or he's going to git away without a scratch, and laugh his crazy head off at us folks."

"You doubt my word?" Linden inquired mildly, brushing back his coat to clear the Colt .44 on his right thigh.

Mattox glared contemptuously at him. "I doubt your word, and I doubt your guts to stand up to a man like Swade."

"Would you stand up against Swade—alone?"

Mattox snorted. "I ain't that foolish. Nobody in his right mind would go against Swade alone. Nobody can beat that maniac with a pistol, least of all a wet-eared young punk like you."

"I don't want any trouble here," Linden drawled. "But you'll have to retract some of your statements, mister. And I learned how to use a gun from Swade."

Pine Liggett said, "Apologize to the boy, Matt. You had no call climbing all over him anyhow. Ask his pardon and I'll buy the drinks."

"Not by a damn sight," Mattox said. "He ain't scaring me none with his fancy talk and ways. What I said stands, sonny."

Linden stepped away from the bar to face him. "Reach for it!"

THE other men shifted out of line, and Mattox made a grab for his holster, but Linden's gun seemed to leap into his right hand. Mattox was only half-drawn when Lin's barrel chopped down on the shaggy head, beating the big miner face-down and senseless in the dirty sawdust.

"I'm sorry," Linden said, the .44 hanging easily in his hand as he glanced around at the others. "But you know a man can't take that kind of talk."

"It's all right, son," Liggett said. "Matt asked for it, and we're obliged to you for using the barrel instead of a bullet. I reckon you learned from Swade, sure enough, and I'm backing you to take him—if you have to use that gun. And I hope you do. Now you'll be in Rocky Ridge tomorrow evening, Linden, which is Wednesday. You've got until Saturday night to get rid of Swade and them other two coyotes. We'll be in Saturday to see how things stand. Six o'clock's the limit."

Linden went back to the saloon with rooms upstairs that called itself the Crown Hotel. It seemed as if he had been riding stagecoaches forever, and he was weary and battered and in need of sleep. One more day on the road and then Rocky Ridge—and Swade.

Tired as Linden was, he slept poorly. The raucous night life of the mining camp kept him awake in the morning hours, and when sleep came it was filled with eerie dreams of the nightmare variety. In one of them Swade was chasing Nancy down an endless street; in pursuit Lin was firing shot after shot into Swade, but the slugs had no effect whatsover and the insane race went on until Linden was exhausted.

IT WAS dusk on Wednesday when the stagecoach hauled into Rocky Ridge. Linden observed that the town had grown and taken on some semblance of polish and civilization, with glass in most windows, paint on many buildings, new street lamps and false fronts.

But the Overland station had deteriorated in contrast to the rest of the community. The structures looked decrepit, the grounds littered and unkempt, and Linden knew that this reflected the change in Swade, for once he had maintained the most immaculate station on the line.

Avery, the wizened little man who ran the bar and restaurant in the depot, was in charge of the entire establishment this evening, and Linden imagined that Swade left it all to Avery nowadays. "Thank God you've come, Lin," Avery said, blackened eyes blinking in his bruised face, gashed lips revealing a gap in his front teeth. "It's going from bad to worse here. I can't stand much more of it."

"What happened to you, Earl?" Linden asked.

"Swade," Avery said. "I tried to talk to him and he got mad and slugged me. Nobody can do anything with Swade now. He's drunk all the time and more'n half crazy, but maybe he'll listen to you, Lin."

"Where is he, Earl?"

"Off somewheres with that Gibbons and Cusack, out of town, Lin. Probably back tomorrow or the next day. He don't spend much time here. Just drops in once in awhile to bawl everybody out and knock a few of us down."

"He won't be doing that any more, Earl," Linden said. "Is what I heard about the Rivards true?"

"They're all dead and the story is that Swade killed them. No proof of it, but men have heard Swade admit it when he gets drunk enough. Rivard was the only one who dared to buck Swade here, and Swade didn't like it and kept swearing he'd kill him."

"Where's the law here?"

"All we got's a town marshal, and he won't go near Swade and them other hellions. They tried to organize a Vigilante outfit, but Swade busted it up before they got started."

Linden shook his head slowly. "Swade's all through here. They sent me to tell him."

"He'll throw down on you then, Lin," Avery said. "The way he is now he'd blast anybody. I been afraid he'd kill Nancy and the kid."

"How is she—and the boy?"

Avery bowed his balding head. "I don't know what keeps 'em going, Lin. Must be pure hell living with a man like Swade. But she won't leave him. I suppose she's still in love with him. You going to eat supper here, Lin?"

"No, thanks, Earl," said Linden thoughtfully. "Guess I'll go see Nancy first."

"Well, come in and have a drink with me anyway," Avery invited. "It's been a long time since we lifted a glass together, Lin. Two-three years since you been out here, ain't it?"

"Almost three," Linden mused. "You wouldn't think things could change so in that time, would you?"

"Swade wasn't made for peaceful living, I reckon," said Avery sadly, leading the way into the barroom.

AFTER a few drinks Linden left his saddle gear, carbine and valise in the station, and went out back for a look at the barn, sheds and corrals. Neglect was even more apparent here than in the front yard.

"A mess, ain't it?" Avery mumbled. "But Swade don't take no interest, and I can't do it all, Lin. And the hostler that took Rivard's place ain't worth a damn."

"It's not your fault, Earl," Linden said, laying a big friendly hand on the man's bony, stooped shoulder. "You've done well here. I'll see you later."

Linden walked out the street behind the depot, until he came to the charred mound of ruins that marked the former Rivard home on the outskirts. It was full night now, the stars glittering about the lofty peaks and the moon rising in the east. The mountain air was sharp and cold, laden with the clean scent of pine and spruce.

Hat in hand, Linden stood for a long while, staring at what was left of the place in which he had lived with the Rivard family.

Swade had to die. There was no alternative. Lin wished someone else would kill him. But nobody else dared, and it was Linden's job. Unless he left Swade for the vigilantes from Empire City, and he couldn't do that. Lin had to spare Nancy and her son—and Swade himself—the horror and humiliation of being torn to pieces and hanged by a mob. Lin owed it to the man and friend Swade had been to dispatch him with dignity.

Linden turned from the blackened rubble

and walked along familiar streets toward the Swade house. Junipers grew along the way, dark and fragrant, and white-boled aspens blew silvery bright in the starshine. The cottage was not as Lin remembered. The flowers were gone, the lawn overgrown and rank with weeds. The porch sagged, the screendoor hung askew and a broken window was plugged with rags.

Nancy came to the door, still slender and graceful, but he saw in the lamplight that her hair had grayed and her face had aged. "Lin?" she murmured, peering up at him. "Oh, Lin!" She came into his arms and clung to him, almost with desperation, and Linden held her with gentle firmness, trying to soothe and comfort her. "I'm sorry, Lin," Nancy said. "It's such a surprise. So good to see you. Come on in and have supper with me—such as it is. We're alone so much, I— I guess I've lost interest in cooking."

"Where's Hardy?" Linden inquired. "He must be quite a boy now."

"He went to bed early. He—he's not feeling well, Lin."

Linden heard muffled sobbing then, as it issued from the closed door of young Harding Swade's bedroom, and he looked questioningly at the boy's mother.

"He's been fighting again," Nancy confessed bitterly. "The other boys pick on him, Lin. They're always ganging up on him—on account of his father."

"Why do you stay here, Nancy?" Linden asked. "It's no good for you and the kid."

"Where else is there to go? Father's dead. He wanted us to come back to Julesburg and we should have gone, but I thought then there was still some hope—here. Now it's too late."

"I'll take you back with me, Nancy. You can work for the company, and Hardy can go to school. He hasn't got a chance of growing up right, out here. It isn't fair to the boy."

Nancy shook her head despairingly. "He wouldn't have a chance back there either, Lin. His father is known everywhere."

"He'd be better off there than here."

"I—I can't leave, Lin," she said brokenly. "I'm still trying, still hoping and praying. This—this madness can't last forever."

Linden looked straight at her. "You know everything he's done, Nancy? And still you insist on staying?"

Nancy sighed. "Women are fools, Lin. Haven't you learned that yet? And women in love are the greatest fools of all. Come on, sit down and eat, Lin. It isn't much, but—" Her voice trailed off despondently.

It wasn't much like the meals Nancy used to cook, that was certain, but Linden had no appetite anyway. The world he'd known was gone, crumbled into ruin, and the people he'd been happy with were dead or changed completely. Nothing turned out as it should. Life twisted and wrecked everything and everybody. His world, like Nancy's, had been built around Swade.

IT WAS tragic to see what the last few years had done to Nancy Harding Swade. The gray-streaked hair and deep-etched facial lines gave her a kind of distinction, but the gay, laughing girl was gone forever. She was an old woman at thirty, dull, drained, and withering.

"Did the company send you, Lin?" Nancy asked.

Linden nodded. "I've got to discharge Swade. They'll give him a pension for life if he'll move out of here."

"Why does it have to be you?" she cried. "He'll kill you, Lin. He kills everybody now. Men that bump into him on the street, or look crosswise at him in a saloon. I don't know what's happened to him, Lin, I just can't understand it. The drinking doesn't help, of course. Neither do Gibbons and Cusack. But it's more than that, something inside himself. Perhaps he killed so

much—for Overland—it got to be a habit. In order to live, he has to keep killing. Oh, I don't know, Lin, I really don't know."

"You don't think he'll acept the pension, Nancy?"

"No, he won't pull out. He owns this division and this town, and he won't leave them. He'll shoot you, Lin, and anyone else they send to fire him."

"If he's fast enough," Linden said slowly. "Thanks to Swade, I'm pretty good with a gun myself."

"But you can't fight him, Lin!" Her voice was horrified.

"Why not, Nancy? He's only human, only one man."

"But it would be like brother against brother, or son against father, Lin. You can't do it, that's all."

"Well, maybe I can persuade him to resign and take that pension," Linden said. "If Swade isn't out of here by Saturday evening, the miners from Empire City are coming after him. I tell you this, Nancy, so you'll understand, in case I have to—I'd rather shoot Swade myself, Nancy, than have those Vigilantes string him up in public."

"Dear God," Nancy moaned. "You think you've hit rock bottom and things can't get any worse, but you can always sink lower and things can always take a turn for the bad. Lin, do you want to stay here tonight. There's the spare room you used to sleep in."

"No, thanks, Nancy," Linden said. "I've got to go back into town, but I'll see you tomorrow." He glanced at the boy's bedroom. "Wish I could do something for Hardy, but I guess there isn't much chance."

"He's sleeping now, I think," Nancy said. "He'll be all right, Lin. He's a good boy and he isn't afraid of them, but there are always too many kids against him. So he gets licked and comes home crying, and mad at himself because he can't whip them all."

"Sure, Hardy'll make out," Linden said. "Away from Rocky Ridge he'll do fine. Good night, Nancy."

She walked to the door with him, and reached up to kiss him on the cheek. "Good night, Lin," she murmured. "And God bless you, boy."

CHAPTER THREE

King of Killers

SWADE didn't show on Thursday, and the suspense was becoming intolerable. The town seemed to know that Linden was here after Swade, and if Lin didn't get him by six o'clock Saturday evening the Vigilantes from Empire City were coming.

Friday passed under steadily increasing pressure, and by sunset Swade still hadn't come. Linden was smoking an after-supper cigar on the Continental House veranda when a man came up and reported that Swade and his two friends had just ridden into the Overland Stage station and stabled their horses.

Lin sat smoking until two men swaggered up from the depot on the opposite side of the street. Fellow loiterers on the gallery identified them for Linden. The big, shambling grizzly bear with the enormous shoulders and fierce bristling beard was Gibbons, who could fell a steer with one blow and break a man's back like a rotten stick.

The lanky one with the frozen desk-mask of a face was Cusack, a gawky looking scarecrow of prodigious strength and uncanny skill with a sixgun. The worst pair of killers, next to Swade, in the Rocky Mountains.

Apparently Swade had remained at the station. Minutes after Cusack and Gibbons had turned into the Great Divide Saloon across the way, Linden left the hotel porch and strolled down the street toward the Overland layout. The street lamps bloomed golden along the sidewalks.

Swade was leaning on the front of the bar, with little Avery cowering behind it, the terror plain on his battered features. Swade's voice sounded through the screendoor: "You been talking a little too much about me, Earl, and I don't like it. Get out my brandy bottle."

Avery started reaching in under the counter, but Swade said, "Not there, you fool," and pointed to the backbar. "You know what I drink."

"Don't, please," begged Avery, obviously afraid to turn his back on Swade. "I've got a wife and kids, and I never—"

"Get that bottle," Swade cut in, and cursed him for a crawling coward.

Avery turned and reached for a bottle on the shelf. Swade grinned and started lifting his right-hand gun. Linden kicked open the screendoor and strode inside.

Swade let go of his gun and turned to face him. "Lin!" he said, with surprise and pleasure. "Well, I'll be dogged. You're just in time, son. Come on and drink with me, kid." He held out his hand, and Linden grasped it.

The change in Swade was shocking, but vestiges of the old charm remained. The blue eyes were sunken, no longer clear and steady, and the carved features were coarsened, blurred by a florid puffy look. But Swade's easy smile and soft voice were still winning and friendly, when he wished them to be. Avery set up the bottle and glasses, and Swade poured the drinks.

"Go on back to the kitchen, Earl," Swade said, not unkindly. "Lin and I got a lot of talking to do. Come on, kid, let's sit down here and be comfortable."

THEY talked and drank, lowering the brandy at a remarkable rate, and at first Swade seemed almost like his old self and Linden was captivated once more. But as the liquor took hold, there was a strange and frightening transformation in the man, the evil and the pent-up violence beginning to show starkly. Swade wasn't the same man. Something had altered him terribly; something like insanity had him in its grip. He was a stranger, a monster held in check by a hair-trigger, and Linden was more than half-afraid of him. It wasn't like facing a rational human being.

Swade went after another bottle, and Linden saw that he was drunk and ugly now, although he still moved with that fluid ease and assurance. Swade was apt to turn on him any moment, and Lin couldn't relax for a second. Lin was sweating in the evening coolness, and the brandy failed to ease the aching dryness of his throat.

"They sent you out here to cut me loose, didn't they?" Swade said, and there was no more friendliness in him.

Linden nodded. No point in denying it. He went on to explain the company's generous terms.

Swade laughed scornfully. "They can't run me out that easy, boy. I made this division, just like I made the Julesburg one. This is mine, kid, and I'm going to run it."

"But you aren't running it very well," Linden said.

Swade stared in astonishment. "Watch your tongue with me, Lin. Maybe you're a big man back there in the home office, but you aren't big out here. You're still a punk of a kid in my book."

"Why not be sensible about it? You're off the payroll, and you might as well take that lifetime pension and move out. Before Saturday night. All the miners in Empire City are coming after you then."

"Let 'em come," Swade said. "There aren't enough of them to take me."

"You can't fight an army."

"The three of us'll stop that yellow-bellied bunch of dirt-grubbers." Swade pushed back his chair and stood up, smooth and controlled despite his load of liquor. "Now what are you going to do about this situation? You going to try and move me out?"

Linden rose and faced him across the table. "Maybe," he drawled. "If I have to."

"Well, I'll be damned all to hell." Swade glared and wagged his head. "Reckon this is the thanks I get for raising you from a pup, huh?"

"If you won't pull out you'll die here. If I don't kill you, those vigilantes will. You've got three choices, Swade. Move out or get shot, or die at the end of a rope."

Swade eyed him with wonder. "You really think you could take me, kid?"

"I think so," Linden said.

"You want to try it now? I hate to kill you, Lin, but no man crosses me and lives. Let's see that draw I taught you, boy."

Linden shook his head. "Not yet. I'm hoping it won't come to that."

Swade studied him somberly. "All right. We'll be friends until you're ready to make your play. Come out to the house for supper, Lin. You've probably seen Nancy and Hardy, but they're always glad to see you again. Nancy was always kinda sweet on you, son."

"Thanks, but I've had supper."

"Well, you can talk to the folks while I eat. Come on, Lin, for old times' sake."

"All right, then," agreed Linden.

They walked side by side to the door, and there Swade dropped slightly behind to let Linden go out first. Lin felt it coming, but too late to dodge or duck. His skull seemed to explode under the slashing gun barrel. The floor rushed up at him as his legs folded, but Linden never felt the wood beneath him as he sank into bottomless dark.

Linden's last fleeting thought was: This is death, and I deserve it for being such a sucker. If that blow didn't do it, Swade'll finish me off with a bullet.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rendezvous in The Big Divide

HE HAD been drowning for a timeless interval, sinking and rising and sinking again, until at last he broke the surface with a splitting headache and retching nausea. The place was cell-like, dim and musty, and as memory came back Linden decided it was a seldom-used storeroom in the Overland Stage depot.

His arms and legs were unbound. His shell belt was still in place, with the .44 in its holster, and his flat-crowned hat lay beside him. After a while Linden stood swaying and groggy, then staggered forward to try the door. It was locked or barred.

There was one high tiny window in the room, burlap-covered, and it looked like daylight outside. Not bright but dull and gray. Sometime on Saturday, he estimated, either early morning or late afternoon. And six o'clock was the deadline. That mob of miners would get Swade, if Linden didn't take care of him first. He still didn't want to kill Swade, but he'd rather do it than have Swade lynched.

Linden drew his pistol and rapped on the heavy wooden door. His tongue was crusted, his throat parched and burning, and pain throbbed steadily in his head. He was choking with thirst, and his legs quivered from weakness. He'd been out a long time, he figured, and it might be too late to get to Swade ahead of the vigilantes.

He hammered again on the door, fearing that the station was abandoned. Maybe he could shoot his way out, if he had to. He was ready to cock the gun and start shooting when a bolt grated back and the door swung open. Earl Avery stood there, amazement and anxiety on his thin face.

"I didn't know, Lin. Swade told me you went to the hotel last night. Are you hurt bad?"

Linden looked out the windows. Fading light and long lavender and blue shadows told him it was late afternoon. Avery said it was about five o'clock. The march of the Empire City miners must be nearing Rocky Ridge. Avery brought a bucket of water, and Linden drank deeply before plunging his head into it.

"Where's Swade?" he asked after pulling out of the bucket.

"Out back, saddling up. Cusack and Gibbons already got their horses. Looks like they're riding out before the vigilantes get here."

"That'll only postpone it," Linden said. "This has got to be settled now. I'll see Swade. Where did the other two go?"

"They rode into town," Avery said. "Be careful, Lin. He'll try to kill you for sure this time. He was going to gun me last night if you hadn't come in when you did."

"I won't turn my back on him again," Linden said, checking his Colt and slipping it back into the leather sheath.

"God help you, son," Avery said. "Wish I was a fighting man myself so I could side you, Lin."

Linden stepped out a back door and crossed the shadowed yard toward the stable. In front of the wide arch, Swade had bridle and saddle on his coyote dun and was tightening the cinches. He looked up and saw Linden, led the horse aside, dropped the reins, and paced lazily forward to meet him.

Swade was smiling, easy and affable. "Sorry about last night, Lin," he said. "I just wanted to put you away safe, so you wouldn't be getting yourself killed. Cuse and Gib don't believe in half-measures. Hope I didn't hit you too hard."

"Where you going, Swade?" Linden asked.

"You were right about fighting an army, kid," Swade said. "No sense in it. We're pulling out until the vigilantes go back home. Then I'll come in and talk business with you."

"We'll talk business right now. I want your resignation."

"There isn't much time, boy. Can't you wait until we get those miners out of our hair?"

"You're willing to resign and take that pension then?"

"Why not?" Swade said. "I can't fight the whole Overland Stage Company, any more than I can the whole population of Empire City."

"Did you tell Nancy you were moving out for good?"

"Sure, I told her. She's tickled about it, and so's the kid. We been here too long, Lin. New country and a new life is what we need." Swade was a trifle too glib and suave.

"I think you're stalling—and lying," Linden said bluntly.

Swade's blue eyes flared and his lips thinned. "Not many men call me a liar and live."

"I ought to kill you, Swade." All at once Lin wanted to get it done.

Swade's laugh was mocking. "You think you can, boy? Start reaching."

"I know I can," Linden said quietly. "You aren't the man you used to be."

SWADE hung on the verge of drawing, watching and waiting for Linden to break down, but Lin was even calmer and surer than his former teacher. Swade relaxed with another laugh. "We shouldn't be fighting, Lin. I'm riding out now. Soon as it's safe, I'll come in and we'll settle everything. All right with you, son?"

"All right, Swade," Linden said, feeling faint and hollow from the strain, but relieved that it hadn't come to shooting. He couldn't forget the old Swade. He'd never expected to lift a gun against Swade, and he never wanted to.

He watched narrowly as Swade turned and walked back toward his horse. Once Swade hesitated, right hand brushing his gun handle, and then he looked back and smiled. He picked up the reins and went around behind the horse to mount from the left side. Linden saw the change in his eyes and face, and was drawing his own gun when flame blossomed across the saddle at him.

But Linden was moving to the left as his Colt cleared leather and blared on a down-

ward slant under the dun's belly at Swade's legs. The shot burned past Lin's right shoulder. He saw Swade buckle and grab the saddle-horn as the horse began to pitch. Swade fired once more before the coyote dun bolted, dragging him along its far side in a storm of dust. Then Swade was rolling in the dirt and the horse was gone.

Gunflame torched up from the ground, and Linden lashed two swift shots back at the winking muzzle light. Lin saw the slugs smash Swade against the smoking earth, both of them hitting the body and rolling the man over.

So I had to do it, after all, Linden thought. Well, he's better off dead, and it's the best thing for everyone concerned . . . But I'm sorry, Swade.

Linden had punched out the empties and was thumbing fresh shells into the cylinder, when hoofbeats hammered in alongside of the stage station. Cusack came in on horseback, gaunt and towering in the saddle behind a blazing gun. Gibbons swung off and ran lumbering behind him on foot.

Linden lined and let go at the charging horseman, but the buckskin caught the bullet and went down, Cusack flying clear to tumble and slide in the weltering dust. Cusack's gun was roaring before he came to a stop, the flashes splitting the dustclouds. But Linden had the lank prone figure targeted and he slammed two fast shots into it. Cusack jerked and twisted on the ground, hunched his hips up and fell sideways into a motionless sprawl. Lin spun to meet the other man, knowing he was too late.

Big Gibbons was rushing in close to make sure of Linden, snarling in his beard, when Swade suddenly came to life, pushing himself up on his left hand and firing point-blank at the on-coming giant. Smashed to a standstill by that unexpected blast, Gibbons turned in a blundering circle and toppled into the gravel, knees drawn up and hands clutching his middle. Swade was slumped on his face again.

Incredulous, Linden made certain Cusack was dead. He found Gibbons gut-shot and dying. He kicked the big man's guns away, and walked back to kneel beside Swade.

"Couldn't let him—get you, kid," Swade panted, trying to grin with dirty, reddened lips. "I'm gone, son. You got me good . . . Best thing—that ever happened—to me. Best for Nancy—and Hardy. Overland and you, Lin. Good deal—all around." A spasm racked Swade, and sweat sprang out in great drops on his face. "Tell Nancy—I'm sorry. Take care of 'em, Lin."

Linden got up wearily and holstered his Colt .44, stumbled across to a horse trough to duck his head and wash his face and hands. The water wouldn't take away the reek of gunpowder and dust and blood. He needed something stronger than that. Leaving three dead men and a dead horse there, Linden went into the station barroom and drank straight from a bottle, while Avery watched him with awe and wonder.

"When the vigilantes get here, Earl, show them the backyard," Linden said. "I'm going out to tell Nancy and the little boy."

"Swade had to die, Lin," said Avery. "Don't be blaming yourself. But he came through for you at the end, didn't he?"

"He sure did," Linden murmured. "He saved my life, Earl." Lin raised the bottle in a silent toast and drank again.

"He died well," Linden said softly. "He was satisfied. I guess I'm the one that isn't, Earl."

"You did your job, Lin," Avery said. "Nobody could have done it any better."

"Yes, I reckon that's about all a man can do. His job, whatever it is, the best way he can. Have the bodies taken care of, Earl, after the miners see them. And tell the people in town that Swade died fighting on my side—for the Overland Stage Line."

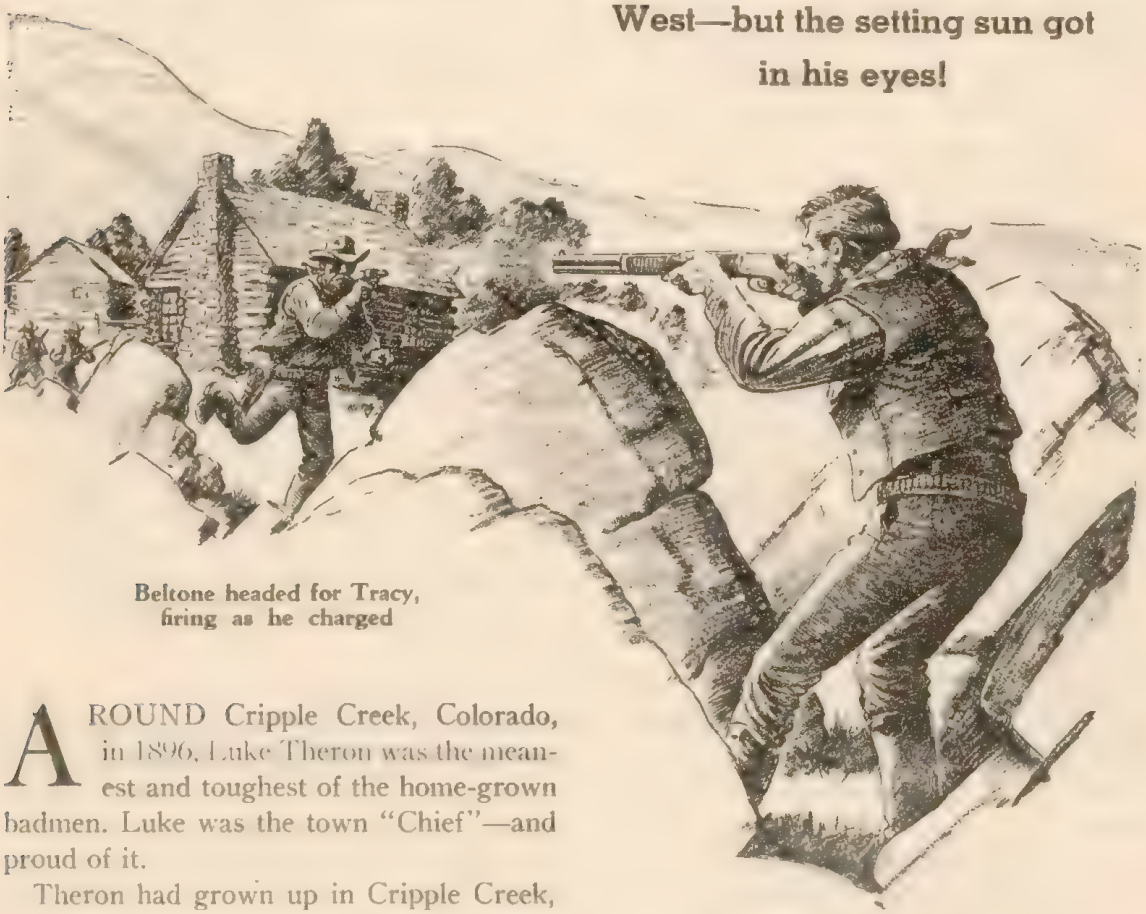
Linden walked out, tall and straight in his dirt-smeared suit with the bottle hanging from his big hand, and Avery gazed after him. ⁂

BRING HIM BACK — DEAD!

By

JOHN T. LYNCH

Harry Tracy might have been the greatest killer in all the West—but the setting sun got in his eyes!



Beltone headed for Tracy, firing as he charged

AROUND Cripple Creek, Colorado, in 1896, Luke Theron was the meanest and toughest of the home-grown badmen. Luke was the town "Chief"—and proud of it.

Theron had grown up in Cripple Creek, had never been far from home grounds; so he didn't know that all badmen didn't dress and act as he did: loud, uncouth and dirty. For this reason, he can be charitably excused for getting himself killed by the quiet, neatly-attired gentleman who had registered himself and pretty young wife into the Cripple Creek Hotel as "Mr. and Mrs. Harry Ward."

Mr. Ward, alias Harry Tracy, alias the Sundodger, was a truly evil man. Slightly on the thin side, medium of height and weight, the Sundodger was a gentle-voiced person, calm and confident looking. He dressed well but plainly, like the average bank clerk or storekeeper of that era.

Butch Cassidy, Harvey Logan, the Sundance Kid, the Tall Texan and the other outlaws of the Hole-In-The-Wall country, with whom Tracy had ridden, feared and distrusted him.

In 1894, when a member of John Shortell's organization of horse thieves, Shortell

was visibly afraid of the Sundodger. He had good reason to be. This point was proved the day the Sundodger killed Shortell and took over the gang leadership.

Theron had no way of knowing these things. Lounging on a porch across the street from the Cripple Creek Hotel, Luke had watched with interest the two strangers enter the hotel to register. Luke's eyes had wasted little time on the man. His leer was aimed at the modestly but expensively-dressed woman, shapely and beautiful.

Hanging around for another glimpse, Luke was amply rewarded, an hour later, when she emerged from the hotel, alone, and crossed the street, evidently headed for the millinery shop up the way. Luke's fellow loungers howled with glee when Luke doffed his battered hat and made a sweeping bow as the lady passed. Then the local badman made a few sour remarks that convulsed everybody present but Mrs. Ward.

The lady was not amused. She turned quickly and hurried back to the hotel.

The boys were still laughing at the woman's fright when Lars Kelly, a widely-traveled bartender came by.

"Lemme in on the joke, boys," said Kelly. "Ol' Luke been up to somethin' again?"

"Sure thing," Luke answered. "I seen two tenderfeet—guess a tourister an' his woman—check into the hotel. She come out a few minutes ago an' I said to her—I said—" Luke couldn't finish his sentence; he was laughing too hard.

Kelly gulped. "You—you mean you're talkin' about that man an' woman who came down the street a little while ago?"

"Yep," said Luke Theron. "That's them. You see 'em go by your saloon? Mousy-lookin' gent, wasn't he? But that woman—oh—"

"Hell, Luke, you better stop laughin' an' start runnin'! Sure, I saw those two. Soon as I could I hung up my apron an' came down to see 'em. Watched 'em all the way down to the hotel, so I know I ain't mistaken. Old friends of mine. On my way over to say howdy." Lars Kelly stood quietly for a moment, shook his head and said to Luke Theron, "Good-bye, Luke." He held out his hand to shake.

"What you mean by that, Lars? You ain't goin' away, are you?"

"No, but you are, Luke. You ain't got long to live. You see, those touristers—as you called 'em—happens to be the Sundodger an' his wife, Genie. That 'mousy-lookin' gent' is Harry Tracy."

Abrupt silence settled over the group. Luke Theron, the local badman, tried to grin. His knees, he found, would hardly hold him, his face was stiff. He tried to make a flip remark, but his voice had left him. Then, as the full import of his predicament came over him, Luke pulled his gun from its holster, tossed it in the street and ran.

THERON'S cronies stood agape as they saw the man emerge from the hotel across the street. Eyes widened and hearts beat faster as the Sundodger approached them steadily.

"Er—er—howdy, Sundodger," stammered Kelly. "Remember me? From out Montana way, you remem—"

"Glad to see you again, Lars," said Tracy, in a low, even tone. "Now, which one of these hicks spoke to my wife?"

"Wasn't none of these lunkers, Harry," Lars Kelly put in quickly. "You know I wouldn't chance lyin' to you. The one that insulted the missus is long gone. That's his gun out there in th' street."

"Why'd he throw his gun away? Figured I wouldn't shoot an unarmed man, eh? Now, where in hell did he get that idea?"

"All I know is he breezed up to get his horse, in front of the saloon where I work, and lit out. Prob'ly half way to Denver by now. See, I told him who you was."

"Not worth chasing," the Sundodger mused. Then he smiled at Lars and stuck

out his hand. "I'm really glad to see you again, Lars. Sorry about the interruption. Come on over to the hotel. Genie will be tickled pink to see you, too."

As Kelly and Tracy started for the hotel, Luke's friends scattered to tell the town the big news that the Sundodger was in their midst and that Luke Theron definitely was no longer the town's "chief."

As Theron shakily walked into Frizzel's Roadside Saloon, about ten miles from Cripple Creek, and ordered his first drink, his intention was to quiet his jumping nerves without undue delay, then gallop on. But after four stiff drinks of Frizell's rotgut, he found that his nerves had not only calmed, but that he was beginning to wonder why he had been so afraid of the Sundodger. True, he had heard, as who hadn't many gruesome tales concerning Harry Tracy. But—who in hell was this Tracy, anyhow, to think he could bluff Cripple Creek's top badman?

"I'll just mosey on back there," he told the bottle in front of him. "I'll kill the Shun—Shundodger. Thash what I'll do. Then I'll have me a real rep—reptashun, I will."

A few hours later, Lars Kelly knocked on the door of the Sundodger's hotel room.

Genie Tracy opened the door and smiled a greeting. "Well, Lars, I know I asked you to come and see us again, but I didn't think it would be so soon—come on in."

"You don't seem calm as usual, Lars," Harry observed. "You got something on your mind?"

"Sure have. That damn fool Luke Theron—he's the one you wanted this afternoon—came back to town. Somebody gave him back his gun. He's roarin' drunk, over to the Acme Saloon, and yellin' around that he came back to kill the Sundodger. Thought I'd better warn you."

"Thanks, Lars. I'll just mope on over there right away."

"Aw, now, Harry," Kelly protested "I ain't hornin' into your business, but Luke is awful drunk. He wouldn't have no chance against you, sober, let alone drunk."

"What difference does that make?" asked the Sundodger. "Trouble with you, Lars, is that you've got middle class morals."

"I ain't neither," said Lars. "I don't itch anywheres."

That's not exactly what Harry means Lars," Genie laughed. Then she added proudly, "Harry means he kills any man who needs killing, without being held back by those popular notions of 'Never shoot a defenseless man,' and all that poppycock."

Genie Tracy was, in her own way, as evil as her husband. She had often sided him in murderous forays, and had a few killings to her own discredit. Both she and her husband were devoid of sympathy, pity or feeling of any kind for other humans, themselves excepted. Strangely enough, they were extremely devoted to each other.

"Go ahead, Harry. Go on over and kill that Cripple Creek Romeo. I'd have done it myself, today, but I didn't have my .38 along. Hell—I was just going to buy a new hat."

The Sundodger told the still protesting Kelly to lead the way to the Acme Saloon. Afraid to refuse, Lars obeyed. He made a final attempt to prevent the killing when they got to the saloon's porch. "Look, Harry, this Theron has a lot of friends. Even the sheriff cottons to him. You'll get arrested for murder, sure. No matter how it happens, you'll get arrested for murder. That is, unless you intend to kill the sheriff, too. An' a few of his men."

"No, I don't intend to kill anybody but Luke. I'll permit the sheriff to put me in his jail, if he wants to. I won't stay in it long, though. Not very long."

"Me, I'll wait out here," Kelly said as the Sundodger pushed his way through the batwing doors, reaching for the gun under his right coat-tail.

LUKE THERON, babbling incoherently at the far end of the bar, turned toward the door to try to see what everybody else was looking at. Hazily, he watched the crowd melt to one side as the man with the drawn gun approached. "You must be Luke Theron, being the loudest mouth in here," Tracy said softly. "I'm the man you aim to kill. I'm the Sundodger."

Luke made a clumsy pawing move toward his holster, then made a still clumsier move when he crumpled to the floor with two bullet holes over his left eyebrow.

The ugly word "Murder" was heard throughout the crowd of onlookers. Slowly, sullenly, they formed a deep ring around Luke's corpse and his killer. The Sundodger tossed his gun on the bar, out of reach.

"Don't want to kill anymore of you rubes," he smiled. "Where's the sheriff?"

Seeing the Sundodger's gun safely away from its owner, Sheriff Perry Plimmer stepped up. "I arrest you for the murder of one Luke Theron," the lawman announced importantly. Election time was close, and what more could a sheriff ask than to be able to say he arrested Harry Tracy? It was a great day for Plimmer.

At a preliminary hearing, although it was brought out that Theron had made an attempt to draw, and that maybe the Sundodger had acted in self-defense, Luke's friends insisted that Tracy be held for trial. The judge, also thinking of the not-far-off election day, agreed.

In the Cripple Creek jail, Genie faithfully visited her husband every morning for a week. The morning of Harry's eighth day of incarceration was cold and rainy. Even Sheriff Plimmer was touched at such devotion when Genie, bundled in a green slicker, appeared for her regular visit. As a tribute to the faithful wife, Plimmer, himself, brought up a chair and placed it by the cell door for Genie's comfort while she chatted with her husband.

Plimmer smiled at the little lady and turned to walk away. He had taken only a few steps when he heard the Sundodger's cold voice. "Just do as I tell you, Sheriff, or you'll be as dead as Theron."

A split second after the sheriff had turned away was all it took Genie to slip Harry a sixgun from the full sleeve of her raincoat.

Within minutes, Plimmer was bound, gagged and locked in the Sundodger's cell. In an alleyway, behind the jail, Harry and Genie got on the horses which Genie had purloined for the purpose and rode away.

The Sundodger, who received this nickname because of his preference for nighttime forays when with the Butch Cassiday band of outlaws, was next accounted for, with his wife, up in the Green River country in November, 1897. With Genie's able assistance, he held up a mule-skinner headed for the great Yellow Lode Mine. Killing the skinner and shattering the shotgun messenger's right arm, the loving pair made off with a box which contained several bags of gold dust; approximately $20,000 worth.

They went separate ways, after the robbery, agreeing to meet in Denver within two weeks. Genie arrived at the rendezvous on schedule but the Sundodger ran into a bit of bad luck. In Provo, Utah, as he walked into a saloon, the shotgun messenger, home on sick leave, spotted him. Tracy, taken by surprise for one of the few times in his life, was arrested by a sheriff and two deputies after a short skirmish. He was soon sitting in a cell in the Provo jail.

Sentenced to the Utah Penitentiary, the Sundodger immediately added to his reputation as the world's worst prisoner. He was there less than a week when he kicked a guard in the face when the latter foolishly leaned over to tie a loose shoelace. For this he was beaten unmercifully. Even so, he continued to be fractious. He broke prison rules time after time, and always was plotting to escape. Prison beatings, solitary confinements in black holes had no effect on him. It seemed his powers of endurance were almost super-human.

WHEN Genie Tracy read, in the Denver newspapers, that her murderous darling was in the Utah pen, she got busy. However, for several months she had no success in even getting a letter to Harry. But, through admirable persistence and a guard whom she finally located who would take a bribe, she finally contacted him.

"*Dearest,*" the note said, "*be good. Act like an angel. Then you will be able to act when the time comes. Expect visitor in one month. Better destroy this.*"

(Incidentally, Tracy never did destroy this note. It was found on him a few years later when arrested in Portland, Oregon.)

Due to their many profitable criminal ventures, Genie had plenty of money with which to hire a broad-minded attorney and a former outlaw friend of Harry's, Pete Rawley, to aid in the escape plans she worked out.

The attorney, who, in turn, also crossed a few official palms with gold, obtained a writ of habeas corpus which required Tracy to be produced in a courtroom in Provo.

When the sheriff from Provo arrived at the penitentiary to serve the papers, he introduced a woman, in deep mourning, to the warden.

"This is Tracy's sister," the sheriff said. "She has been lately widowed, poor thing, and only recently learned that her brother was in prison. She would appreciate it very much if she could see him."

Genie played the part of a saddened sister very well. Pale, meek, she wept into a dainty handkerchief, trimmed in black. The warden was touched.

"I see no reason why you can't visit your brother, for a short time," said the warden, in a fatherly manner. "He has been a good prisoner for the past few months, and has earned a favor."

With three guards watching, Genie visited her "brother." She managed to convey her plan to him, despite the alert audience. All was ready.

Two days later the Sundodger was taken to the depot in a prison wagon, handcuffed and leg-ironed. Practically hauled into the daycoach of a train, he was bound firmly to a seat. A prison guard, Jim Henry, was sent along to help the Provo sheriff get Tracy safely to journey's end.

The daycoach contained no other passengers. The guard sat beside the Sundodger and the sheriff sat in the seat opposite.

Just as the train pulled out, a young man and woman came into the car and took seats near the sheriff. After a time, the young woman, who had been stealing glances at the prisoner, leaned over and whispered to the sheriff, "Is that man a dangerous criminal?"

"Oh, yes, lady," answered the lawman. "Real vicious. But don't worry, you are perfectly safe. He can't do anything but set there. He can't get away. After all, I'm guarding him—an' I never lost a prisoner." The sheriff then puffed up and began to regale the lady with stories of criminals and crime, in which he, sheriff of Provo, always won by brilliance and bravery. Genie Tracy pretended fright and admiration in the proper places. Pete Rawley, the young man, remained quiet and bored.

As the monotonous trip wore on, the guard beside Tracy dozed off. The sheriff, his voice finally tired, relaxed and closed his eyes.

Rawley quietly opened the small traveling bag on the seat beside him. From it he took a .38 and handed it to Genie. He armed himself with a .45.

"Sheriff, I hate to bother you, but—" Genie said.

The lawman opened his eyes to stare in disbelief at the young lady standing in the aisle beside him, pointing a gun at his head. Rawley walked over and brought the butt of his gun down on the prison guard's skull. The man went into a deeper sleep.

Genie and Rawley were businesslike. With efficiency and dispatch, they bound and handcuffed the sheriff and the guard.

Then they quickly freed the Sundodger.

With a third gun, produced from Rawley's bag, Tracy stood guard at one entrance to the daycoach, while Rawley kept watch on the other. When the train stopped at Taraum Junction, Genie and Rawley got off and politely waved to the conductor as the train pulled out. Just after the train left the station, Tracy alighted from the rear car and disappeared into the forest.

As planned, the Sundodger met Genie in Carson City, Nevada, a few days later. Pete Rawley, once paid off for his able assistance in the escape, headed for Idaho.

Several months later, after a series of bank robberies, Genie and Tracy were trapped in a shack near Lewiston, Idaho. A large posse had sneaked up on them while they slept. However, Travy awakened before any of the pursuers reached the shack door and called to Genie to wake up, while he grabbed his gun and started what turned out to be an all day battle.

After dark, the outlaws decided to dash for their horses. Tracy made it but Genie didn't. She was killed by posse bullets just before she reached her horse. Tracy didn't pause when he saw his wife go down. His interest was only in himself. He leaped on his horse and galloped away, bullets whistling all around him. . . .

TRACY'S grief over losing his beloved and helpful wife wasn't of long duration. A month later he married another charmer. This lovely creature happened to be a dancehall girl in the broadest sense of the term. Her brother, Dave Merill, was a bank bandit of some note. Her father had been lynched in Denver, in 1894. Also, to add more luster to Mollie Merill's family tree, there was the fact that her mother was the notorious "Mama" Merill, the well-known fence for stolen goods.

The Sundodger was happy to learn Mollie was as handy to have around, in serious situations, as the late Genie. Also, he congratuated himself in obtaining a brother-in-law who was an expert killer in his own right. In all, it was a cozy little family group of first-class cut-throats, thieves and murderers.

Things went well for some time. The money rolled in from many bloody forays. Then the brother-in-law, proud of his connection with the Sundodger, started to brag about it in the saloons. One night, in Portland, a city detective overheard his remarks. He was arrested, quietly, and was offered a deal. He'd go free if he'd turn informer on the Sundodger. Merill accepted the terms.

Merill arranged a rendezvous with Tracy. The lawmen closed in. The final result of the betrayal was thirty years in Oregon State Penitentiary for the Sundodger.

This time, Tracy decided to be a model prisoner from the start. He wanted to be ready when Mollie came to help him escape —as Genie would have done. But he waited many months, in vain. Mollie didn't even write.

In March, 1902, the Sundodger enlisted the aid of two small-time thieves who were about to be released, as well as a trusty who would act as intermediary inside the prison walls.

The two newly-released men followed instructions to the letter.

First obtaining a large sum of money—to defray the expenses of the escape—from a spot where Tracy had planted it, long ago, in case of just such an emergency, the men delivered guns, ammunition and a rope ladder to the intermediary. The trusty smuggled them into the prison's foundry, where the Sundodger could get at them. Two days later, Tracy and an unnamed prisoner scaled the prison wall and escaped, after killing three guards and wounding a fourth.

A short time later one of the greatest manhunts in history was on.

The escapees reached the outskirts of Salem at daybreak. Stealing clothes and horses at gunpoint, they headed toward

Portland. The trail was picked up by bloodhounds leading a huge posse.

Several hours later, two lawmen were relieved of their horse and buggy by the Sundodger and his pal, who then rode gaily down the main street of Gervais, bowing and smiling at the townsfolk.

In a patch of forest, not far from Gervais, the two criminals were surrounded by a hundred-man posse. After a tense three-hour wait, the posse found the quarry had slipped through their lines.

The next they were heard of was when they reached the outskirts of Portland, where they forced a ranch wife to cook them breakfast, then headed for the Columbia River. A boatman was ordered to take them across, at gunpoint. The next night they shot their way through a roadblock not far from Chehalis, Washington. A day later they were reported to be about fifty miles from Tacoma.

From then on, Tracy was alone. He had killed his partner for some remote reason that was never explained. The corpse was found by the baying bloodhounds, still on the trail.

Three days later, the Sundodger, dirty, unshaven and weary, entered the office of a small fishing concern. Armed, by now, with a Winchester and a revolver, he was not too weary to order the skipper of a little steamer to round up his crew and man the vessel.

Taking up a vantage point on the deck, Tracy commanded that the ship head for Seattle. Then he ordered the cook to rustle him some breakfast. For eight hours the Sundodger dominated the ship, the crew of seven, and the captain.

The alarm had spread early in the day, and while Tracy made his voyage he was being hunted by three steamers, two revenue cutters and several tugboats jammed with lawmen from all over the vicinity of Puget Sound.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, Tracy ordered the steamer to put him ashore a few miles north of Seattle. As a farewell gesture to his shipmates, he tied them up securely before going ashore.

Late that night, in a heavy rain, he was again cornered by a posse, but killed two of the men and vanished once more.

THE entire State of Washington took up the hunt. The governor ordered out the militia and more bloodhounds were pressed into service. Men rode with loaded guns

GUNS OF THE NIGHT RIDERS!

By Marvin de Vries

The riders pulled into the ranch, their nooses and guns in their hands, hunting the rustlers. It was as it had been twenty years before—only this time the men at Arrow were guilty—and this time Arrow would die before it'd give up its men to the marauders!

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and housewives kept their doors locked.

The Sundodger appeared in south Seattle, then, later, at Renton. After that, weeks went by with no sign of Tracy. The earth seemed to have opened and swallowed him.

The hunt slowed down, and interest lagged. Newspapers surmised, as did many lawmen, that Tracy was dead. The law just hoped he was.

Then, in the middle of July, the Sundodger walked into a logging camp in eastern Washington. Although outnumbered at least fifteen to one, Tracy took immediate command. The loggers felt it best to let him have his way. After demanding—and quickly getting—food, clean clothes and a fresh horse, Tracy departed. The camp foreman hastened to the telephone and spread the news that Tracy was still around, and very much alive.

The second week in August, after a manhunt that lasted fifty-nine days, during which the Sundodger had covered more than five hundred miles of rough country, three separate posses caught up with the fugitive at the same time. It happened that his goose was cooked.

Tracy had arrived at the Eddy brothers ranch, near Creston, Washington, late in the afternoon. He ordered a meal and had just started to eat it when he realized that armed men were carefully approaching from every direction.

The Sundodger, rifle under his arm, jumped up and ran out the back door. He dashed for a formation of huge rocks, not far from the house, and took his stand. Protected on all sides by the rocks, tall and rugged, Tracy grinned. He had hidden extra ammunition here, as he had noticed what a fine fortress the spot would make He had evidently made plans to stay at the Eddy ranch for some time, and took precautions before even entering the house. He liked to look ahead.

For a half hour, Tracy and the possemen exchanged shots. Slowly but surely all of the members of the posse crawled toward the west side of Tracy's little fortress. They had noticed that most of his bullets were being slammed in the other three directions. And each man knew that the best place to be was where Tracy, the crack shot, was sending the least lead.

Suddenly, Tracy began to feel pangs of panic. He realized that, superb shot that he was, he was missing his marks. The possemen were cautiously coming closer and closer, but every time the Sundodger fired at one of them, he missed. The posse saw this, too, and crawled nearer. Tracy was firing wildly.

Shad Beltone, a deputy sheriff, took the big chance. He crawled to within yards of the rock formation, then stood up slowly. The Sundodger fired three times and missed. Beltone headed for Tracy, firing as he charged. A cheer went up as possemen saw the Sundodger go down, his body pitching clear of the rock defenses. Two bullets had plowed through his head. He died instantly.

The possemen clapped Shad Beltone on the back, and praise was in the air. Shad, a modest man, protested. "I can't take credit for this thing," he said. "They's no credit due. I shot a helpless man. All I did was shoot a blind man." Then he pointed toward the west. "Look," he said. "Take a look at that!"

The men looked. Then they understood. The bright, glaring sun, about to set, blinded all of them, momentarily. They could see nothing.

"Tracy was facing that setting sun all the time," said Shad. "That's why his shots all went wild. He couldn't see a damn thing. If it hadn't been for that sun, Tracy might have lived, and some of us would sure have died. It's a hell of a way for a man like that to die!"

Shad looked thoughtful for a minute, then added, "Kind of funny, though, ain't it? Seems the great Sundodger couldn't dodge the sun. The old sun got him in the end." ⁂

TEXAN, BEWARE!

By W. J. REYNOLDS

Yellow Jacket reckoned itself an ornery, hell-raisin', uncurried frontier town, until along rode Texas Wade Rickham—a boothill-sent gent who made rock-hard men turn pale!

HE RODE into Yellow Jacket shortly past noon and put up his horse at the livery before slanting across the street to the Tiger Lily Saloon, pausing on the boardwalk to beat some of the yellow dust from his denims and jacket with his faded black hat before he pushed through the latticed doors. He propped his elbows on the bar, a big-shouldered man with sweat runlets marking his square brown face.

A lean hand hovered near the hide-out shoulder gun

He ordered beer and drank the first schooner thirstily, then built a cigarette while his glass was refilled. Thumbing a match to the smoke, he surveyed the huge barroom in the clean mirror behind the bar.

A dozen men were scattered about the tables, two at the end of the bar near the front doors. The empty dance floor at the rear with its raised dais had a cave-like gloom. It all seemed to be waiting for night and the blaze of lights and influx of whooping miners and cowboys.

Wade Rickham removed his hat again and massaged his red curls briskly with his fingers, grinning at the bartender, "Hot, ain't it?"

"Yeah," the bartender said. "About right for lizards." He returned Wade's friendly grin and started to elaborate on his remark, but he glanced toward a rear table and the man there and suddenly found business at the other end of the bar.

The bartender's unease was too sudden to ignore and Wade looked at the man back there. He was looking at Wade, yellow eyes flaring as he came slowly to the bar.

Rickham's brown face betrayed none of the alertness that was in him as he watched the man speak a short word that brought him a bottle and glass. He slid it down the bar to Wade.

"Texas?" he said to Wade shortly.

"Texas," Wade said with equal shortness. His blue eyes locked with the yellow ones. "Wade Rickham, Texas."

There was no change in the expression on the pale, narrow face. The man had reason to jump Wade.

Something I did, or the way I look, he thought. Maybe this is the place.

His glance moved to the man's hands and saw that no finger or tip was missing. But Tandy had had another partner beside Tom Rickham.

Wade said, "Montana?"

The face was still. "Raised here in Arizona. Name's Dexter. I own part of this place." The yellow eyes were roiled now and a lean hand hovered near the hide-out shoulder gun.

"Well," Wade said, "we could spar around and rake up a quarrel, or we can get right at it. What was it about me that you special don't like? Is there something about me that put blood in your eyes?"

The hand left the bar for that shoulder gun when Wade drove the hard toe of his boot against Dexter's shin. He whipped a freckled fist over that caught Dexter just bending over the shin and snapped him straight up again. Wade hit him with a looping left that sent him skidding, dazed, into the sawdust.

Dexter glared bleary-eyed for a moment, then he grabbed at the gun half out of the holster. Wade swung his boot and the toe caught Dexter at the wrist, and with the distinct snap of a bone, the gun spun half across the huge room.

White-faced, Dexter huddled there, hand gripping the broken wrist, hate glaring from his eyes. Nobody else had moved, and men stared at Wade. Most of those looks, Wade noted, held cautious satisfaction.

Dexter struggled to his feet, and held a table to steady himself, then he turned and walked toward a door beside the dance floor that was marked PRIVATE. He disappeared inside.

WADE saw the girl then. She was part way down the stairs from the rooms above. She was slender, dressed in a dark green dress that set off her black hair and striking eyes. Her face was composed; she seemed to hold her breath as she watched Wade.

Wade turned to the barman, "Give me another beer." His grin was a little puzzled. "Guess he didn't like my red hair, huh?"

The bartender brought the beer and said with a quick glance at the closed office door, "Feller, I'd watch out if I were you. Dexter'll kill you for sure. He can't stand that."

"Thanks," Wade said. "I'll watch."

Wade drank the beer slowly, frowning thoughtfully. Dexter knew Wade. He must know him. Else why should he try to kill him? But how could he know him? He didn't look much like Tom, except for the hair and forehead. That was it. The hair, and the habit that both he and Tom had of rubbing their scalps briskly.

The girl moved closer and stopped beside him. "You play rough, stranger." The striking dark eyes probed his face.

He rolled another smoke and lighted it. What was this? She would be the leading light here, bait for the easy money boys. Maybe Tandy's woman. Or Dexter's. Still, he didn't want to think so. There was none of the usual hardness in her, or the inner sickness that usually showed in these women's eyes when they realized what they had come to. Maybe she hadn't accepted her fate yet.

"I'm a peaceable man," Wade said. "I like to see people happy. Trouble was in that man when he braced me."

"Yes, but he's still not happy about it. He'll kill you. Or maybe with a broken wrist, he'll have it done; plenty will do it for a price. You could camp a long ways from Yellow Jacket by night."

"I'm a lazy man, too," Wade said. "I hate to be rushed about." He grinned at her. "I'm a sorry subject for talk; let's talk about you."

She shook her head, and a faint smile showed in her eyes. "No. I have two men talking about me now. I don't want a third one."

"Then keep that lovely nose out of my business." He was smiling. "I like your looks. I might fall in love with you."

"Have it your way, stranger," she said, and turning abruptly, she moved quickly to the stairs and up them to disappear into a room there.

"Who was that?" Wade asked the barkeep.

"Linda Dane. She sings and dances some here." He looked at Wade with grudging admiration. "Stranger, you can sure hit the hard spots. Both Dexter and the other owner, Nosteen, are hasseling after her. Mister, they'd murder you over her in a second if they had no other reason."

"I figure they already got a reason," Wade said. "So one more won't matter." He finished his beer and left the saloon.

He sought a restaurant, ate heartily, then wandered through the heat to the line of tall cottonwoods along the small stream at the edge of town. He lay back in the shade of one, propping his head against the bole, and watched the Tiger Lily from narrowed eyes.

"Yessir," he said after a bit, "I reckon this is the place, and that Nosteen character will be Tandy. He's the dude will have the missing finger."

He cocked his hat over his face, and dozed. A half hour later, the sound of brisk steps, made him cock an eye from under his hat at the tall shape of the girl, Linda Dane,

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and she came up to stand looking at him.

"Pull up a chair, my love," he said. "Tell Papa Rickham about it."

She sat down near him. "Ha, ha," she said.

He sat up and cocked his hat back with a thumb. Her dark eyes searched his face, seemingly trying to make up her mind about him.

He laughed. "Linda, what you need is a cabin, two rooms, anyway, and a man like me. There'd be kids to scold and watch after and a hungry redhead to feed. It'd take that misery out of your eyes." He sobered quickly as her face abruptly loosened and she barely held back the tears. "Hey!" he said. "Easy now."

"You like to twist the knife, don't you?"

His voice was suddenly gentle, "Sometimes it's worse not to twist it. In the long run."

Her face was composed again, but she said quickly, "What's between you and Dexter? He's fit to be tied. Cursing and raving and swearing; he'll kill you on sight. What you did to him would make him wild, but this seems to go farther."

"Fear," Wade said. "I've got to be killed and he'd like for everybody to think it's for what I done to him. I figure he murdered my brother. Him and this Nosteen. Up in Montana near two years ago."

HER eyes grew shadowed again. "You knew them then?"

"Never set eyes on them." At her puzzled look, he said, "Me and Tom, my brother, had a ranch in Texas. Little place, but we had ambitions, and sunk our money in good stock from Iowa. Then the drought, on top of Texas fever, whittled us down. We figured on it and decided one of us would hit the gold camps. He won the toss."

"And he was killed up there?"

He nodded. "After he struck it rich though. Him and two fellers he was partnering with. Feller named Tandy and another named Dade. They murdered him to keep his cut of the twenty-five thousand in gold. Sheriff found him in the cabin, dead. He found the tip of a finger, too, or thumb. Tom had got off at least one shot."

"Wasn't it a very long shot to look for men you'd never seen?"

He shook his head. "I lost the ranch, and, wandering around, I'd look over all the country I could. I had friends too and they'd send word of a likely pair. You see, Tom wrote me about the strike and his partners. Tandy was an ex-saloonman, and wanted another, a big place, preferably in a gold boomtown. It narrowed the search, a saloonman with a missing finger tip."

Her dark eyes met his straight on. "Nosteen has the tip of his thumb missing."

"That does it," he said. "They're the ones. Where is Nosteen?"

"He left town three days ago with his bulldog, man named Big Burt. Out looking over mining property to buy." She reached into her dress front and pulled out a blank piece of paper and passed it to him. "Dexter writes hard with his left hand. You can read the message from the imprint on that sheet. He sent a man with it right after you left."

It was ruled paper and the message was plain from the pressure of the pencil:

> Nosteen:
> Wade Rickham in town. He broke my wrist, but I'll get him today. Lay low till you hear. D.

"Thanks, Linda," he said. "You had your reasons, I reckon."

Color ran in her face, making her look very young and confused. She said, "Sometimes a girl can't choose her job, Wade Rickham. Not in this country."

"I won't question that," he said. "It's hard on a man now and then."

"I have a very good reason to help you. I suspect Nosteen or Dexter or both had me robbed after I sold the cattle and wagon. I had to take the job they offered. It

does pay well for a few songs and a dance."

"What happened? If you'd like to talk about it."

"It's very simple. I was dropped by a wagontrain, Dad and I, after mother died of smallpox. Dad died a week later. I came on here and sold out for good money. But before I could get out on the twice-weekly stage I was robbed in the hotel. Nosteen had been after me a week then to sing in the Tiger Lily. I took it, it was that or—"

"I know," he cut in quickly. "And the law?"

"There is no law. They've sent for a marshal but it'll be a month yet before he can finish the town he's on. The closest law is Tucson, a hundred and fifty miles."

He looked at her with close attention. "You figure it was Nosteen that had you robbed. Have you tried to get a look in his safe?"

She smiled. "I have the combination, all but the last two numbers. It takes time. But I'll get it eventually. Three thousand dollars I want."

"A sharp operator, this Nosteen or Tandy. He got three thousand bucks and a star to rake in the suckers. A wonder he's satisfied with that."

She colored again but said steadily, "He's not satisfied, but I'm making so much money for him, packing the place every night, that he hates to force a showdown and lose me. He would, one way or another, and he knows it. But he won't wait much longer."

Wade Rickham looked at the lovely face with the sadness and misery deep under the smooth planes, a face made for smiling and warmth and with secret laughter lurking about the full mouth. Here was a woman that would make most men forget about money.

He leaned forward, his hand gentle on her arm. "I—"

The bullet hit the cottonwood's bole viciously. Wade bowled the girl over, sending her, with a flutter of skirts, into a foot-deep wash that emptied water into the main branch. He went in behind her as the second bullet jerked the collar of his denim jumper. Two more bullets shrieked off the ground over them and then the rifle was abruptly silent.

WADE peered over the rim of the little wash, his head screened by a clump of grass. A thin pall of smoke was dissipating at an upstairs window of the Tiger Lily. The window was down now and even as Wade looked the shade came down too. In the street, men were moving cautiously, craning their necks, trying to locate the shooting.

"Looks like Dexter is working at his ambition already," Wade said.

Linda Dane's face was white. "Wade, if you hadn't leaned forward when you did. . . ." She shuddered.

"I know what you mean," he said soberly. The anger came to him suddenly and his teeth clenched. After a moment he said, "I reckon I'll have a little confab with Dexter. I'm liable to have a belly full of lead, or ulcers, if this keeps up."

"Wade Rickham!" she flared at him. "It's not funny! Don't be a fool. Don't you know you couldn't get any where near Dexter in the Tiger Lily? There are a dozen back alley bums in Yellow Jacket he could get to kill you for fifty dollars!" The fire went out of her and she put her hand on his arm and her eyes were dark and pleading. "Wade, why don't you forget this; you can still have that little ranch before you're too old. Go back to Texas, Wade, and I promise to let you know when the law takes over here; then you can have them do it."

He smiled at her. "And have those killers come for me, Linda? Tandy and Dexter wouldn't let me live now." He shook his head. "I got to finish it. I got a good reason beyond the eight thousand dollars they owe me. When I ride out of here it'll be for Colorado to a place I know, good grass and good water, lots of water. And if

I wind this up right, I figure to ask somebody I know if they'll go along."

She got quickly up to her feet and he came upward to face her. "Linda."

She said, "A woman can stand a lot of things, Wade. She can even manage sometimes when she don't seem to have a chance. Like having her security and folks jerked from under her; but to have her own home and her own man dangled in front of her and have that jerked away. . . . Many times, Wade, she can't stand that." She turned and walked rapidly toward town.

Wade hunkered down, partly screened by the wash, and rolled a cigarette, his eyes on the girl. A man would need a real woman beside him while he hewed a home in Colorado. He knew that was what he wanted. He came to his feet and walked toward town. A man would never get a thing done if he didn't get at it.

The sun was two hours high yet, and Wade went back to the restaurant and ate. He'd never get into the Tiger Lily openly. He'd have to wait until night and then get in someway. He had no quarrel with any saddlebums or back-alley men. He wanted only Dexter and his money.

He killed time till dark by getting a haircut and shave, and afterwards a bath. When he came out it was dark, and he stood in the shadow of a closed store and smoked, watching the saloon. It was filling up and ponies already jammed the hitchrail. Pretty soon he would make his try. . . .

A boy came trotting up the street, went into the barber shop and came out to stop near Wade. "You Wade Rickham?" Wade said, "Yeah," and the boy handed him a folded paper. "Lady sent it." He scampered away.

Wade moved over to the light from the barber shop and read:

D having me watched, I can't leave. Don't do anything. He has a dozen men stationed around to kill you. Pretend to leave town. I'll meet you a mile west of town in two days and let you know if all is clear. L.

Wade felt the chill in his belly. It could be Linda, he didn't know her writing. It *was* a feminine hand all right, but Dexter could have gotten one of the other girls to write it. . . .

Dexter was working at this. If he had so damn many gunmen at hand, why didn't he just sic them onto Wade Rickham? The thought didn't cause Wade any joy, and the more he thought of it the less he liked it. He'd get his horse and cache it in the darkness; he'd be in a hell of a fix if he had to get out of here in a hurry.

He slid down the alley between two stores and then down the back alley to the wall of the livery. He moved down to the street and to the gate of the livery. The gate opened into the livery compound, a huge square lined with stables, and at the rear was the barn and feed. In front, on one side of the gate, was the office, on the opposite side was the tackroom. Wade stepped into the office.

"What's the damage since noon?" he asked the old hostler.

The hostler licked his lips nervously. "A dollar." Wade paid him, and the old man shuffled quickly to the door. "I'll catch your nag. You can grab your saddle outa the tackroom." He scuttled out.

Wade looked after him a moment, shook his head and started toward the tack room. Then it hit him. That old man was in a sweat, and had told a customer to get his own gear. Maybe it was his custom, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe Dexter had a couple of gunhands hid out in the tackroom.

He didn't slacken pace. To do so would probably start them shooting with him in the open space here. They would wait till he came in the door if he showed no sign of suspecting them.

He cursed under his breath. He was a damn fool. The note had been sent to toll him into the livery for his horse and he'd fell right into it like a greenhorn. He'd get his head shot off yet with his man-hunting.

He paused at the corner of the tackroom,

and hurriedly shucked his jumper. To cover his pause, he called toward the stables, "Watch his head, old man, he'll bite yours off!"

He lifted the .44 from his belt and shoved open the door, and pitched the jumper inside. It flared open, then jerked sharply as gunfire beat thunderously inside the small room. Wade leaped back to flatten at the corner.

"A damn trick!" a man inside yelled. "Outside! He's getting away—"

A man rushed out, gun jutting from his hand, and behind him another man stumbled out, coughing from the powdersmoke inside. Wade lowered the muzzle of his .44 and fired twice. The leading man lunged in a long fall. The second man fired, his bullet splintering the wood at Wade's head. Wade shot him three times.

The first man's hands were over his head, and he was yelling, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

He bawled wildly as Wade jumped forward, and threw his hands over his head as Wade's gunbarrel swung. Wade smashed a fist, and the man howled and jerked away. Wade hit him behind the ear and he keeled over.

WADE hurriedly punched out the hulls and reloaded, then he ran for the street, crossed it and went down the alley for the Tiger Lily.

Rage was boiling inside Wade. That damn Dexter. Gone wild with his ambushes! Well, damn him . . .

He went up the outside stairs that would put him near the window where Dexter had potted at him with the rifle. He would maybe be waiting word after the shots . . . Wade rapped on the door.

"Let me in," he whispered, muffling his voice with his free hand. "That damn hellion smashed my hand!"

Dexter's voice rapped through the door, "You get him? Is he dead?"

"Yeah, yeah, let me in—"

"Hell, you ain't Tobe! You're that—"

A gun burst into a rapid roll of sound and jagged splinters marked the door, letting out streaks of light. Wade lifted his gun and emptied it at the door, spreading the pattern. As he fired the last shot, he snapped open the gate and punched out the empties and shoved in new shells.

There was a choking sound inside and the sound of a falling body. Wade rammed a boot against the door's bottom panel and as it splintered he saw Dexter on the floor, blood covering his white shirt. Wade turned and ran down the stairs and around to the front and went in.

The place was in an uproar, and men were scattered along the inside stairs. Upstairs a man yelled, "Somebody salted Dexter! Shot him to doll rags!"

"That stranger!" another roared. "Hell, he just shot up Tobe at the livery and killed Evans! Damned if I want to meet him."

Wade shoved through the milling crowd, heading for the office near the dance floor. He saw Linda's white face there, and, as she saw him, her eyes dilated and her hands clutched her breast. She came quickly to him.

"Wade, for Heavens sake! Get out while you can! Nosteen just came back. He's in the office there with Big Burt! Wade—"

"That's good, Linda. It's better luck than I'd hoped for! He can pay me the money he owes me." He shoved past her and rammed through the door. The door wasn't locked and it flapped back against the wall inside as Wade came through to put his back to the wall.

A tall, dark-faced man stood in front of a roll-top desk; his clothes were dusty, and even his dark mustache was sprinkled with the yellow dust. A second man stood near him, a big man with thick lips and brutal, much beaten face. Big Burt.

Wade looked at the dark-faced man. "Howdy, Tandy," he said. He looked at the slender hands and noted the absence of the left thumb.

Tandy's teeth showed briefly under his mustache. "You're a lot like your brother Tom, Rickham," he said. "He was a great hand for barging ahead and crowding the hell out of his luck. It killed him."

Wade was aware that Linda had come in and shut the door. She stood against it, breathing hard, but with lips clamped tight shut. Wade said, "About eight thousand, wasn't it, Tandy?"

"That's right," Tandy said pleasantly.

"Eight thousand," Wade said. "Add Linda's three to that. Make it an even eleven thousand. You got that much cash?"

"Just about that," Tandy said.

"Get it," Wade said.

"Let Linda do it," Tandy said. "She's been wanting the combination for some time!" He told her the numbers and watched her move to the big safe in the corner. Then he looked back at Wade and down at the .44 slanted in his hand.

Linda worked at the dial, and then turned the handle and pulled. She pulled harder and the door swung ponderously open.

"Burt," Tandy said. His hand darted for his armpit.

BIG BURT moved with blinding speed for a big man, his gun came up and he fired just a shade behind Wade, the reports blending together. Wade felt the shock in his leg, but he fired again to be sure.

Tandy's gun roared, and Wade felt as if his entire side had caved in. He fired, and fired again. Tandy reeled back.

"Wade!" Linda screamed. "Look out!"

Wade dived aside, partly glimpsing Big Burt's movement. A gun bellowed from the corner, and Wade felt the scorch of the bullet past his cheek. He saw the brutal face of Big Burt contorted with the effort to re-align his gun. Wade lifted his .44 and shot the gunman between the eyes.

He sat there then in the swirling smoke, and blinked at Linda in the flickering light of the wall lamps. She had her scarf by the four corners, the middle bulging.

She was beside him, helping to steady him as he got to his feet. She said unsteadily, "I—I just raked it all in here, Wade. He said eleven thousand—"

"That's all right," Wade said. He looked toward the door as it swung open and several men poked their heads in cautiously. "You fellers looking for somebody?"

"Hell A'mighty!" a man bawled and jerked back into the barroom. "It's that hellion in there now! He's killed Nosteen and Burt! I'm leavin' this damn burg! One more like him and nobody'd have a chance!"

Wade walked into the barroom, leaning on Linda's arm. He stopped and, in a moment, had complete silence. "Nosteen in there was named Tandy; him and Dexter murdered my brother and stole eight thousand off him. I got it back with three thousand they stole from Linda here. I've settled my account with him, and now I'm leaving. Any objections?"

There was a half minute of silence, then a man back in the crowd muttered, "Feller, I ain't got a single objection."

Wade said, and his brown face showed a wide grin, "Step up, gents, drinks on me."

With Linda, he hobbled out the doors. "They think I'm a bearcat," he said. "If they knowed I was a fool redhead with more money than sense—"

"You are a bearcat," Linda said. "Are you as hard on women?"

"Women and horses run over me till it's a shame," he said. He grinned a little. "But I'm fixing to take the bull by the horns and kiss you, and if you don't knock my head off, I'll likely just stand right here and bleed to death."

"Well," she said, "couldn't you just sort of let me know what to expect?"

A minute later she pushed away from him and said shakily, "You're right, darling. We'll get the leg and ribs patched up before we go into that again."

Her eyes were shining as they moved together toward the M.D. shingle across and down the street over the drugstore. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

Longridin' Lawman

By Harry Van Demark

THERE WERE many instances in the Old West where outlaws turned lawmen—often with a sincere intention to reform and stay out of trouble. Sometimes this paid off—at others it did not.

But the pay was fairly good and the reformed man at least had the protection of those who might otherwise have been on his trail.

Nearly all frontier towns at some period in their hectic history had a law-breaker for marshal, sheriff or deputy. No exception was the town of Caldwell, Kansas.

Yes, Caldwell was really tough. So many marshals and deputies had their careers brought to a sudden end that only a man with a quick trigger finger, a cool nerve and boundless courage could hope to hold the job, even for a very short time.

One day in March, 1881, a Texan rode into town over the old Chisholm Trail. He was big, bronzed and fair-haired, not over thirty years of age. He came with a Winchester, two sixguns and a record as a fighter. He had been active in the cattle feuds, first near Tascosa, Texas, and later in the Lincoln County cattle war in New Mexico. In both instances he had been on the side of Billy the Kid.

His name was Henry Brown and he was dead broke. He hunted up the Caldwell marshal, Bat Carr, and asked for a job.

Carr's question brought straight answers. Brown looked him directly in the eye as he talked. He freely admitted his connection with Billy the Kid.

"We all make mistakes," he said.

Carr sized him up. "We bury a deputy-marshal here every forty-eight hours, but if you don't object to that feature of the business, you can have the job."

"Suits me a lot," Brown said. "I need money and I'd like to start right away."

"You're on the city payroll as of now."

Things were peaceful, except for misdemeanors, during the next few days. Then a minstrel show came to town, with posters showing the men wearing plug hats.

Sandy Jim Mahan and his crowd were among Marshal Carr's chief worries. Always up to some devilment—some of it malicious. They decided to have some fun shooting holes through those plug hats when the minstrel men paraded.

Word of this plan came to the show manager and he decided to leave out that part of the program.

Marshal Carr heard of this and talked to Henry Brown. Brown assured him that he would take pleasure in taking care of Sandy Jim. He persuaded the show manager to allow the parade to take place.

"A lot of people want to see that parade—and we ain't going to let one man break it up," he said.

As the parade passed down the street, band playing, minstrel men prancing, Sandy Jim, who was seated on the porch of a grocery store, pulled his gun and with a yelp of derision, shot a hole through one of the plug hats.

Sandy's crowd laughed heartily and were about to use other plugs for targets when Brown appeared in their midst.

"Hands up, Sandy!"

With the cool muzzle of the deputy's .45 staring him in the eyes, he sullenly obeyed.

Brown moved in and disarmed him. "Now, let's have fun. Start running!"

Sandy realized that Brown meant business and started off down the street.

Observing a bunch of cowboys enjoying his discomfiture, Sandy suddenly darted to the edge of the crowd and seized a cowboy's gun. Burning with rage, he turned to fire at Henry Brown.

But Brown's gun was already in his hand, and he quickly shot Sandy through the head.

Brown's record as a lawman in Caldwell was good. He stayed on the job until he was killed in a saloon brawl, October 4, 1881.

THE BREAKING OF BOX-T BRADLEY!

Frontier Novelette with a Punch

By

LE ROY BOYD

THE dealer shoved the stack of double eagles across the table. As Mel Tyler picked up the coins, his glance touched the old man at the side of the layout.

The clink of gold was music to Tyler. There were no words, just the tune, and it was an accompaniment to his thoughts. With the thousand dollars he'd won here tonight, he could start looking for the small spread he'd always had in mind during his fiddle-footed days.

"Your girl is safe with me!" Drifter Mel Tyler promised the gut-shot, dying hero. And in the Valhalla of forgotten gunmen the boothill gods roared out the deadly question: Safe with saddle-scum who'll roll your pretty body in an open grave—to keep his promise to your father?

Their horses were better than his. Shortly they began to gain on him

Someone touched his elbow and he turned his head to see the old man. "Could I have a word with you?"

Mel peered at the leathery face. Gambling fever still ran high in him and added warmth to his grin. "Sure. How about a drink?"

At the bar the old man said, "My name's Frank Lonigan. And yours—"

"Tyler—Mel Tyler."

There was a formal handshake, and as they reached for the rye whiskey the bartender set before them, Lonigan said, "Like a job?"

Mel's eyes narrowed as he took the question and turned it over for a look at the other side. This town of Tasajera was a hell-hole, and the Dobie Dollar its center. Offer of a job here could mean running off stolen cows or shooting a man in the back.

"Doing what?"

"Got a little spread up near Indian Wells. The Circle-8. Only me and my little girl."

Mel drained his glass, set it down and twisted it in his fingers to make a wet ring on the bar. "Mr. Lonigan, I'm through punching another man's cows. I'm—"

He halted abruptly. The old man had suddenly gone tense. An uneasy quiet filled the room. Mel turned and saw a short, bow-legged gent with a hat too big on his head. He'd just come in the door and two other hombres were with him. They came towards the old man and stopped a few feet away.

"Lonigan," the short one growled, "sort of off your range—ain't you?"

The old man sensed the challenge. He had iron in him, though, and he wasn't afraid. "Kind of had an idea fifty head of prime steers that was in my south pasture come this way," he said.

"How you figure that?"

"Somebody could have showed them this way."

"You saying it was us?"

Mel shoved away from the bar to get from behind the old man. This was no affair of his, but he didn't like the odds facing Lonigan.

"If the shoe fits, Shorty," Lonigan snapped,"wear it."

Shorty went for his gun and the buck-toothed one followed suit. The third one filled his hand, too, and the combined roar of the explosions was as if an orchestra straight from hell had broken loose.

A slug smashed Lonigan's side. He grabbed the edge of the bar and brought his own Colt into action.

Lead sliced through the side of Mel's shirt. He knew then that the three considered he was with Lonigan and they were going to cut him down along with the old man.

He whipped his Colt from leather and pressed the trigger. The shot went wild to plow a groove in the front of the bar, and he tried again. That went home, and the buck-toothed one fell.

LONIGAN had finally slammed one into Shorty, and Mel swung on the third one. They traded a pair of shots. The hombre screamed and crumpled to the floor as the lead hammered into his chest.

The satanic racket subsided. Mel whirled and faced the crowd. He snarled, "Anybody else want a hand?" No one answered.

Lonigan tugged at his sleeve. "There'll be others—somewhere. Ace Bradley always sends enough men to complete his jobs."

He was hurt, bad. The fingers pressed against his side had become crimson, and his face was washed with pain.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Mel growled, catching Lonigan's arm. "We'll find a doctor—"

When they'd pushed through the bat-winged doors, though, the old man checked Mel. "No time for a sawbones," he said. "That was Shorty, Buck and Tick. Stack Jones won't be far away, and he's poison. If I can hole up some place a few days, I'll be all right."

Lonigan's urgency sent the blood pounding through Mel's veins. He could take the old man to Pedro Gonzales' sheep camp back in the Cucharas. It would be a long ride. Still, he felt in Lonigan's arm a surge of strength that seemed to say the old man could make it. He asked quickly, "Where's your horse?"

It was almost three o'clock in the morning when they approached the cabin and were challenged by the old collie. Pedro appeared in the doorway with Zeke, his nephew, behind him.

"It's me, Pedro," Mel said.

Together they got Lonigan from the saddle and into the cabin, laid him on the bed. Zeke began to jabber, and Pedro told him to light the lamp and make some coffee.

Lonigan sagged back on the pillows and closed his eyes. Mel and Pedro took his shirt off, washed and bound the wound. When they were through, Lonigan roused and gave them a grateful smile.

"That java sure smells good," he said.

Pedro filled him a cup, fixed the pillow so he could sit up and drink. As Lonigan sipped the black stuff he looked at Mel. "Sure appreciate your help back there."

"Didn't have much choice."

"Of course," Lonigan continued, "you can't prove Ace Bradley had anything to do with it. But he's been trying to get my place to add to his Box-T. Wants them springs. If I was out of the way—there'd be only my little girl, Nora—"

Mel saw the old man was getting too excited. "Better take it easy," he warned. "See if you can get some rest."

"I'll be okay. Just want to know—" The old man caught his breath as a spasm of pain gripped him. He waited until it had passed. Then: "How'd you like a partnership in that Circle-8 of mine?"

"Why—I—"

"Let you have a half interest for five thousand. Put up the money you won tonight and take all the time you want to pay the rest."

Mel's gaze narrowed on the old man. There was a need to humor him. He said, "Sounds all right to me."

"Have to get some paper to write out the agreement."

Pedro got a tablet from an old tin trunk, and Mel wrote down what Lonigan dictated. When it was finished they put their names to it and had Pedro and Zeke sign as witnesses.

"Notice," Lonigan said, "that if anything happens to me the partnership is to continue. My share will go to my little girl."

"Nothing's going to happen to you," Mel grunted.

He really believed Lonigan would pull through. That afternoon, however, a fever developed, and by evening the old man was delirious. Mel kept cool cloths on his forehead, yet by the time Pedro and Zeke returned from tending the sheep, it was obvious Lonigan could not live.

It was almost eleven o'clock that night when Lonigan grew quiet. He roused, and there was a moment of lucidity. "Looks like this is the end, son," he said.

"I wouldn't say that. You can make it."

The old man shook his head. "I won't make it. But I'm ready. Only regret I have is for leaving Nora. If there was somebody to look after her—"

"No need to worry there."

"If you kinda help her." The old man caught his breath. It seemed a long time before he drew air into his lungs again. "First thing you do," he said, "record that agreement at the courthouse in Indian Wells."

Lonigan became still then. Mel waited a couple minutes, then bent and closed the old man's eyelids. He glanced at the two Mexicans at the foot of the bed. They crossed themselves quietly as he walked past them and strode outside.

He went to Pedro's old rickety wagon, sat down on the tongue and made himself a cigarette. His thoughts were like the wheel on which he'd gambled last night.

They couldn't keep going around and around forever; they'd have to slow down after a while and click into a slot. Then he'd know what to do with a half interest in a ranch he'd never seen and a little girl who had been left on his hands.

An hour later he got to his feet and looked up at the clear bright stars. Shrugging aside the mood that had held him he and went back to the cabin.

MEL rode into Indian Wells a little before noon the following Thursday. He stopped at Slim Haggerty's livery stable to leave his horse along with Lonigan's horse which he'd brought.

He walked the block to the plaza, entered the old courthouse and made his way to the clerk's office. He laid the agreement on the counter and asked that it be recorded.

The clerk, a tall slender gent, was just about to close up and go eat. He pulled the paper towards him, glanced at the clock on the wall, and automatically jotted down the time at the upper right hand corner of the agreement. "First thing after dinner," he said. Then he noticed what kind of an instrument it was and arched a questioning eyebrow at Mel.

Mel pretended not to notice the gesture. "I'll pick it up later," he said, and left.

Outside, he halted at the top of the steps and let his gaze go around that part of the town on this side of the courthouse. He made a mental note of the bank on the northwest corner of the square and the Spread Eagle to the south of it. On the northeast corner was the hotel. He crossed the courthouse yard to the hotel and washed up at the basin set on the back porch. When he'd finished, he went into the dining room to get something to eat.

It was a little after one o'clock when he finally headed for the bank. He walked inside and on a door at the rear he saw the letters E. J. HAWLEY, PRES. Stopping at a window where a young man was counting currency, he asked, "Mr. Hawley?"

The young man jerked his head towards the rear door. "You'll find him in there."

Hawley was a big raw-boned individual who gave the impression he'd have been more at home outside than in. He sat at a roll-topped desk going through papers. When Mel walked in and said he'd like to talk, he pointed to a chair against the wall.

Hawley swung around from his desk. He sent a glance over Mel, noted especially the clear blue eyes, the firm jaw which, in spite of a beard stubble, indicated a youthful determination. He said, "What can I do for you?"

"Like to know how much of a place the Circle-8 is."

The banker didn't reply at once. He seemed to be turning something over in his mind. After a bit he said, "Eleven sections. About average pasture and good water."

"What's the place worth?"

"Thirty thousand shouldn't be too much, with what stock Lonigan has there. Fact, fellow's coming in pretty soon and I'm going to suggest that amount." Hawley's lips curved slightly with a smile. "Wouldn't be in the market to buy it yourself?"

"Hardly. I already own a half interest in it!"

A keen look flashed in the banker's eyes. "How come?"

"Frank Lonigan and I went partners few days ago. Agreement's at the courthouse now being recorded."

"Rumor hit town yesterday Lonigan's dead."

"That's true. But the deal still stands. He made it so. His interest goes to his daughter."

"You should know then the bank has Lonigan's note for five thousand. Due in six months, and his account is pretty low right now."

MEL stared at the banker. Then he remembered that he hadn't even seen the Circle-8. Common sense told him he

should investigate before deciding to go ahead. But in the past he'd more than once bet all he had on a card before it was turned face up.

He reached beneath his shirt and drew forth the handkerchief in which he'd wrapped the gold eagles. "I'll make a deposit."

Hawley accepted the money and counted it. He pulled a pad towards him on the desk. "What did you say your name is?"

"Mel Tyler."

The banker wrote out the slip and handed it to him. He said, "We ought to have a copy of that agreement."

"I'll have the courthouse clerk make you one."

He folded the slip, and as he put it in his pocket he glanced up to see a big man in the doorway. The newcomer was dressed in a cowman's garb and there was a vitality about him that seemed to fill the place with a sense of power. A young woman was with him.

"Come in, Ace," Hawley said. "Nora, you know this fellow?"

Mel rose to his feet. She centered her attention on him and shook her head slowly.

"Claims your father took him in as a partner."

A lump rose in Mel's throat. Lonigan had spoken of his little girl, but there had been no hint she was nineteen.

She had auburn hair, her eyes were blue, and a warmth crawled slowly up Mel's neck. He'd expected her to be about five, and had thought he could leave her with some good family. But—

"What the hell." Ace Bradley blurted. "A saddle tramp?"

Nora looked at Hawley. "Does that mean—"

"It means nothing," Ace interrupted. "If you're willing to sell—I'm ready to buy."

Mel drew in a quick breath and sent a narrowed glance at Ace. "What's your offer?"

"Five thousand, cash. And I'll take up Lonigan's note."

"We're not selling."

"But—but—" Nora began.

Hawley said, "The name's Mel Tyler."

She brought her eyes again to Mel, and he had the feeling she was fighting to keep back the tears. "With that much money," she said, "I could go and live with an aunt in Kansas City."

"We don't need to pay no attention to this bum," Ace growled angrily. "Just go ahead with the deal like we planned."

"What about the agreement between Lonigan and me?" Mel said.

"He's having it recorded at the courthouse," the banker said. "Looks like you can't get a clear title till that's nullified."

Ace's mouth curled. "But now that Lonigan is dead their partnership ain't worth the paper it's written on."

"There was one special paragraph," Mel said curtly, "that says the partnership's not to be dissolved in case of the death of either party. That means I still keep my share."

"And it makes you a partner with Nora here?"

"You guessed it."

Bradley's cold stare was a ruthless force as tangible as a stone wall. "We'll see," he snarled, and shoved past Nora out of the office.

Mel glanced at Nora. She regarded him silently for a bit, and then the tears came. "Why do you have to come here and spoil everything?" she cried. "If you'd tended to your own business . . ."

"That's what I'm doing. And yours, too."

"I can take care of my own affairs. All I ask of you—"

She didn't finish. She turned and left, hurried through the bank, and the front door slammed behind her.

Mel waited a few seconds, then looked at the banker. "She'll be going out to the ranch?"

"Doubt it. Been staying at Amy Brown's

here in town while her father's been gone." Hawley closed one eye and squinted at Mel with the other. "You don't appear like a fool to me."

"What made you think I might be?"

"Trying to buck Ace Bradley. He's been wanting those springs on the Circle-8 now for a long time." Hawley lit a cigar, broke the match and dropped the stick into a spittoon. "Haven't met up with Stack Jones yet—have you? Bradley's top man."

"Buck and Tick work for him, too—"

"Did. Quit about a week ago and pulled out of the country."

"—and Shorty?"

Hawley rolled his cigar to the corner of his mouth. "Shorty got throwed by a wild bronc few days ago. Busted up some, but I haven't heard how bad. Hasn't been in town."

Mel shot a sharp glance at the banker. "Who brought in word that Lonigan was dead?"

"Fellow going through stopped one night. Didn't know much about the details, but said there'd been a shooting down near Tasajera."

"I see." Mel put on his hat and gave the brim a jerk. Saying he'd be around later, he walked out, and reaching the street headed for the Spread Eagle.

CHAPTER TWO

Range Hell

HE WAS standing at the bar when a fat man with a lawman's badge pushed in beside him.

"Mind if I drink one with you?" The officer's round features had an appearance of friendliness, yet there was a flinty quality in his gray eyes.

"Not at all, Sheriff," Mel said, and motioned to the bartender.

"I'm Clem Crosby," the sheriff said, and Mel completed the introduction by giving his name.

"Got into town this morning? And brought in a Circle-8 horse?"

Mel felt the cold at the pit of his stomach. "Was taking him home."

"Knew Frank Lonigan pretty well?"

"Only met him the night three hombres jumped him down there at Tasajera." Mel lifted his glass, drank the liquor and waited until the heat of it had banished the coldness inside. Then: "I was with Lonigan when he died."

"How'd you get mixed up in it?"

"Lonigan had just asked for a word with me. We were there at the bar—like you and me here now—when these hombres walked in. They forced me to take a hand."

"You bringing the bronc home would hardly mark you as one who might have done for the old gent." The sheriff reached for his glass. He drank and drew the back of his fist over his mustache. "Sticking 'round the country for a while?"

"Sort of figured on it. Thought I'd ride on out to the Circle-8—if you could tell me how to get there."

The sheriff gave him the directions. "Before you go," he said, "let me buy you another drink."

As Mel rode out to the spread, he wondered about that. The sheriff had been cordial enough, yet there'd been a feeling that the lawman was skeptical. There'd been an implied warning, also, that he was to remain where Crosby could find him.

What if somebody should accuse him of the killing? He was a stranger here, and he might have a hard time clearing himself.

He topped a rise finally and saw below him the ranch buildings. Even from here he could see the place had run down; there'd be a lot to do but now he'd be working for himself. He reined his horse to a halt and let his eyes go over the spread, and in his mind he saw a windmill near the barn there and a patch of alfalfa on ground south of the corral. He'd bring in new stock, too, to build up a good herd.

He descended the slope and, rounding the barn, came on the saddled bronc in the yard. His glance shifted to a young woman on the porch, and when she called he swung his horse towards the house. He dismounted and stepped up on the porch.

"Thought you were one of our hands," she explained.

He said, "Who are you? And what are you doing here?"

"I'm Anne Bradley. Checking up on the house to see what changes we'll be wanting to make." She paused, and her teeth closed over her lower lip. "Don't believe I've seen you before."

"Mel Tyler is the name." She appeared about twenty, with dark hair and brown eyes. She wore a blouse and divided skirt, and from one of her leather-gloved hands dangled a quirt. Something about her spelled schooling in the East.

"There won't be any changes in the house," he said abruptly. "I own an interest in the Circle-8 now, and the ranch isn't for sale."

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Apparently you don't know Ace Bradley."

"I've met him. But your pa still doesn't get the ranch."

Fury sent the color rushing into her features, and he noted she had her father's dominant will. She tensed as if to strike him. Suddenly, however, she relaxed as the tempest of her emotion subsided. "You're going to live here, then? With Nora?"

A burning heat rushed into his face. He fought against it, yet knew she perceived his embarrassment. "Don't know about her," he said. "I'll be around, though."

"If we're going to be neighbors, we might as well be friends."

"Just as you wish."

She slapped the calf of her boot with her quirt. It was an impatient gesture, like one made by a person brushing aside a bothersome fly. The moment of irritation passed quickly, however. "I must be getting home," she told him. "Care to ride a ways with me?"

He peered at her, trying to divine her motive. He said finally, "Okay."

HE WAS quiet as they rode north towards the Box-T. Listening only partly to her chatter, his eyes scanned the lay of the land. Occasionally he answered a question she asked him directly, but he spoke so absent-mindedly that once she chided him.

"Never would have guessed you were so shy."

"Thinking of something else," he mumbled.

She shrugged, as if the conversation were of no importance after all, and led him through a bit of rough land rising gradually to a crest. When they reached the top of the slope, she reined to a halt and held out a hand.

"I'll be all right from here on," she said. "When will I see you again?"

He clasped her hand, and as she let it lay in his a moment longer than necessary, a warmth ran up his arm. "Don't know," he muttered. "I'm going to be busy."

"I like you, Mel."

He made no reply to that. Apparently she did not expect him to, for she had already started down the hill. He watched until she was out of sight, then swung his horse around to ride back on the trail over which they had come.

Night had come and the dim light of the newly-risen moon was over the land by the time he arrived at the ranch. His thoughts were still on Anne Bradley, and the shot which broke the stillness as he rode into the yard caught him unawares.

The slug whipped close by his head. He noticed the powder flash up there on the porch. He grabbed for his Colt as his bronc reared, and some instinct caused him to throw himself from the saddle.

His bronc shied away, and gathering his legs under him Mel leaped for the barn. For

a moment he was silhouetted against the sheen in the east, and the bushwhacker took another shot at him. Mel plunged inside the barn.

The hombre's horse was in a stall there. Mel made sure no one else was in the barn and returned to the door to look towards the house. He had some questions to ask that fellow, and to do that he had to get to the house. But he couldn't cross the yard without being picked off.

He turned back into the barn and led the hombre's horse to the door. Tying the reins to the saddle-horn so they wouldn't trail he gave the animal a slap on the rump and fired his gun at its heels.

The bronc lunged forward and swerved towards the road to town. As Mel had expected the gunman cut loose, and while his attention was still on the horse, Mel ran from the barn and sprinted for the house.

He pulled up at the corner of the building. He listened intently and finally caught the sound of a bootheel scraping on a board. The gunman was at the north end of the porch.

Mel moved towards the back of the house, circled the building and approached the front on the other side. He eased around the corner and saw the man pressed against the wall half way between the end of the porch and the front door.

Bunching his muscles, he jumped. The other heard him and whirled. Mel crashed the barrel alongside his head a fraction of a second before the other could bring his own weapon to bear, and the bushwhacker went down.

Mel kicked the gun out into the yard. He tarried a moment to be sure the fellow was out, then went inside and struck a match to find a lamp. He made a light and carried the man in. A frown creased his forehead as he stared at the old derelict.

He remembered now seeing the fellow near the livery stable this morning. He'd run into him again at the Spread Eagle and had got the impression the old man was the saloon flunky. He recalled, too, that the bartender had called him Lumpy.

Lumpy stirred, opened his eyes and, seeing Mel, tried to get to his feet. Mel pushed him back on the couch. "Not so fast."

Lumpy's shoulders slumped, yet his old eyes held inexplicable hatred.

Mel moved to a chair. He sat down and rolled a cigarette. "What was the idea—taking those pot shots at me?" he asked. The old man remained silent, and he tried again. "How'd you know I was out here?"

"Bradley said you'd come this way."

"He sent you?"

"Didn't need nobody to send me—after what you done to Nora!"

"I've done nothing to her."

"She's been crying her eyes out ever since that business at the bank. Whatever that was. I'm telling you—Nora and her old man were good to me that time last winter when I was sick. Better go ahead and shoot me 'cause the first chance I get I'll kill you!"

"Then Bradley would get the Circle-8 and you'd get a rope around your neck."

Lumpy still had some self-respect left. He squared his shoulders and the muscles of his face took on a bit of firmness. But then he sagged again to become the old man that life had whipped.

"Down there at Tasajera . . ." Mel said, and briefly told Lumpy what had happened. When he had finished he added, "I have an idea about those three fellows who jumped us."

"You'll never prove Ace Bradley had anything to do with that."

"He's going to do that himself."

"But what about Nora? She'll do anything to get you out of the way."

"I'll talk to her again." Mel paused, his gaze narrowing at the old man. "See here, Lumpy. I'm going to get this ranch on its feet again. You look as if you've worked on a ranch once. How'd you like a job with me? Pay you regular hand's wages."

Lumpy sneered at the offer. "You can't buy me."

"Think it over. Let me know in the morning."

Mel got up and went outside. He caught the horse and took care of him. Returning to the porch he searched on the ground for Lumpy's gun. When he'd found it, he carried it inside and dropped it on the couch beside Lumpy. With Lumpy's eyes following him he turned and walked into what had been Lonigan's bedroom. After a while he heard the old man stirring, and in a few minutes Lumpy blew out the lamp to cut off the light streaming through the open doorway.

AT daylight next morning Mel was roused by the sound of approaching horses. He sat up and pulled on his boots. He went out to see who had come, and, as he passed through the parlor, he saw Lumpy still on the couch. Mel stepped out to confront the four riders. His eyes caught the Box-T brand on the flank of one of the horses. Some instinct warned him of danger, and he recalled suddenly he'd left his gun back in the bedroom.

"Tyler?" one rider asked.

Mel stared at him. The hombre was a big-girthed hardcase. A ragged walrus mustache hung over the corners of his mouth.

"That's right," he said. "What do you want?"

"You," one of the others growled.

The big one leaned forward with a pugnacious thrust to his jaw. "Lumpy Griffin came out here last night!" he rasped. "His livery stable nag showed up little after midnight with an empty saddle. Unless you can tell us what's happened to Lumpy there's going to be a hanging."

"Hell—what's the use of talk?" the other grunted. He drew his Colt, slowly thumbed the hammer. "Plug him and be done with it."

"Hold it," the big one barked. "What the devil—Lumpy. Here he is now!"

The old man had come from the house. He shuffled forward to stand beside Mel. "Hello, Stack," he said.

"What're you doing here?"

"Working for the Circle-8."

"You're crazy."

"Maybe. But I'd rather punch cows than clean spittoons."

Stack Jones peered at the old man for a moment, then shot a significant look at Mel. "Don't know just what your game is, Tyler," he snapped. "But if you know what's good for you, you'll quit and pull out. And don't take too long about it." He pulled his bronc around and grunted. "Let's go, boys."

Mel watched them ride towards the north. They topped a low hill and when they were gone from view he turned to Lumpy. The old man seemed worried, and Mel tried to laugh away his fears.

"Suppose we can rake up some breakfast?"

"Frank Lonigan always kept plenty of vittles on hand."

Lumpy went inside to the kitchen and told Mel he'd take care of getting something to eat. He was quiet as he puttered around the stove, and Mel guessed the old man was working to assert his self-respect once more. He said nothing until they'd sat down at the table. After filling his plate, he turned his old gray eyes to Mel.

"You pulling out?"

Mel gave him a grin. "What do you think?"

Lumpy shifted his glance to his food. "If it was me and there was Ace Bradley and Stack Jones—sometimes, you know, it's safer to run."

"What about Nora?"

"She might change the picture." Lumpy broke a biscuit, laid it on his plate and poured molasses on it. "You know, Frank had his heart in the Circle-8. Say—if Nora would come out here—the three of us—we'd make Frank's dream for it come true!"

"We could use a cook. Give us more time outside."

The idea made the old man happy. He smacked his lips and filled himself another cup of coffee. "We'll give Ace Bradley a fight he won't never forget," he mumbled.

MEL nodded. He hadn't paid much attention to what Lumpy had said, though. His mind was on Nora and what it would mean if she should come out here. With her help he could build the ranch into a good spread. He'd have only a half interest in it yet he'd carry out all the plans he'd had for the place he'd hoped some day to own himself. And his dream had expanded now to include—He abruptly cut off the thought . . .

He was working at the barn when a livery rig came into the yard. He smiled when he saw the driver and walked out to the buggy.

"Nora," he said. "We were talking about you at breakfast."

She sat very straight. She was dressed primly in a black skirt and a white waist, and for some reason he especially noticed the cameo brooch at her throat.

She let her gaze go around the yard, brought it back to him. "See you've taken over the place," she said coldly. "As if you thought it was yours."

He saw she was not the same as she had been at the bank. She possessed a resolution now that would not give way to hysterics. "Reckon that's what your father would have wanted."

"But not I. All I want is for you to get out."

Anger flowed swiftly into her features. "I can't wait, Mister Tyler." She sent a look at Lumpy who had come from the house and returned her attention to Mel. "They're saying in town it looks funny you bringing in pa's horse. Maybe you had something to do with his death."

He stared at her, her face drawn and pale, and the implication of what she had said fastened on his brain. He wet his lips with his tongue. "You don't believe that —do you?"

"You were with him when he died. And Ace Bradley says he'll get at the truth of it if it's the last thing he ever does."

"Mel can explain everything," Lumpy said suddenly. He felt her look on him, stopped and swallowed.

"No need for you to get hurt too, Lumpy," she said. "Climb in and I'll take you back to town."

He shook his head. "I'm throwing in with Mel."

"Very well." She flashed them a bitter smile. "But I'll give you not more than a week. Then you'll wonder what hit you."

She swung the old nag in a tight turn, urged him into a trot with a crack of the whip, and took the road back to town.

Mel looked at Lumpy. "So that's that."

"Sometimes a woman don't know what's good for her," Lumpy growled.

A week she said. Mel couldn't get that out of his mind as he rode the range the next two days trying to make a count of the cattle that bore the Circle-8 brand. He had a premonition, though, that he might not even have a full week.

Lumpy met him at the corral as he came in one evening. There was a smirk on the old man's face, and as Mel stepped from the saddle he grunted, "What're you grinning about?"

"We had a visitor this afternoon. Anne Bradley."

Mel pulled the gear from his bronc. "What did she want?"

"Just asked about you."

Mel turned the bronc into the corral and headed for the house. Lumpy caught up with him and cackled, "Some looker, that gal."

Mel had no comment. He was thinking of Anne. She'd promised to be back if he didn't call at the Box-T, but with Ace having declared war he had not expected her to come. He wondered what had brought

her, and the next day he had something like an answer to that.

In the morning he sent Lumpy to town with a team and wagon for some supplies. As soon as the old man was on his way; he saddled up and worked to the east and north of the house, towards the Box-T line.

About three in the afternoon he rode over a hill and saw two men below him looking over a cow and calf. Mel watched them for a bit. One of the men dismounted and approached the calf, and Mel started his bronc down the slope.

The two saw him. The one on foot hastily swung into the saddle, and the pair spurred towards a clump of cedars on the draw's far side.

Mel drew near the cow and calf. On the cow's flank was a Box-T, but on the calf was a Circle-8 with the brand not yet healed. He glanced in the direction where the men had disappeared.

Suddenly a Winchester cracked. The calf made a frightened jump, and the bronc snorted and threw up its head. Mel sought to get the animal under control, at the same time dragging at his sixgun.

THE rifle cracked again, and a hunk of lead slashed the leather on the saddle-horn. Mel knew then he had to get out of there; he had only a short gun.

He headed south and gave the bronc rein. He'd gone about half a quarter when he glanced over his shoulder and saw them coming after him.

Their horses were better than his. Shortly they began to gain on him. Mel rounded a turn and saw ahead of him, up on the hill and to the right, a pile of boulders. He put his horse up the incline, crashed through a screen of brush and slid from the saddle.

He'd hardly had time to press against a boulder and line up his gun when the hombres came around the bend. He cut loose and they swung in opposite directions to get out of sight. They weren't sure of his location, but one tried a shot with the Winchester.

Mel eased back and led his bronc to a spot where he'd be safe, then returned to his cover. He saw nothing of his pursuers. Occasionally the rifle barked, though, the lead searching out his position. And while he waited, the sun slid towards the horizon.

The slug caught him in the left arm, passing through the flesh just above the elbow. It came from the other side where he had last seen the hombres. While one had held his attention, the other had circled to get on his flank. That one had located him.

Mel dodged behind another boulder. He saw a movement behind a clump of cedars. He took a shot at it and was answered by a cross fire. He didn't try another one.

He crouched there, waiting and watching, and in the stillness that settled over the scene he became aware of the numbness in his arm. As he fashioned a bandage he realized he'd have to get some place where it could be properly treated.

He wiped away the perspiration on his forehead and peered through the brush. He guessed the men had left their broncs back a ways and had crawled forward.

Cautiously, he moved towards his own horse. He climbed into the saddle and guided the animal through the boulders and brush to come out on the south end of the patch. A dislodged stone clattered and the two opened up again with their guns. They didn't discover what he was doing, though, until he broke out of the tangle; then they ran for their horses, but he'd gained some time.

He couldn't beat them in a straight-away. He could ride through every bit of rough land he came to, though, where they'd have to go slow for fear of an ambush, and in that way he lengthened the distance between them.

He intended to ride for the ranch, but as he drew near the place he felt something

pull him to the left. He topped a rise finally where he could look down at the spread and reined to a halt. Three riders were in the yard, and while Mel stared at them one swung from the saddle and stepped up on the porch. They wouldn't find him there, nor would they catch him in a trap.

Mel felt his arm. The numbness was giving way to fire, and the fever was beginning to spread through him. He raised his eyes to the sun; in ten minutes it would be gone. It would be dark and he didn't know the road well. There was nothing else he could do, however, and, turning his horse, he started the ride to Indian Wells.

CHAPTER THREE

Cut Sign for Boothill

HE ARRIVED in town a little after ten. Watching for a doctor's sign he rode towards the plaza. A half block from the square he stopped to shoot a second glance at a team tied to a hitch-rail there. It was the team Lumpy had started with this morning.

He heard his name spoken and looked down to see the old man standing by his stirrup. Lumpy had had too much to drink, but he was sober enough to catch Mel as Mel swung a leg over the bronc and slid to the ground.

"Where can I find a doctor?" Mel gasped.

"Better come with me."

Lumpy turned in at a cottage where a light was shining in a window to the rear. He pounded on the door and it was opened shortly by a plump woman whose graying hair was done up in curlers for the night.

"Mrs. Brown," Lumpy said, his voice husky, "we need some help."

Nora was bringing a lamp into the front room, and Mrs. Brown caught sight of Mel. "Don't stand there all night," she snorted. "Get him in here."

Lumpy took him inside and seated him on a leather couch. He told Mel he'd go for the doctor, and the sheriff, too.

Mrs. Brown snapped, "Well, scat, then!" She told Nora to heat some water. Turning to Mel she said, "Let's get that shirt off."

While she helped him she asked, "You the young fellow Nora mentioned?"

She pulled the shirt over his head and examined his arm. "Not too bad," she mumbled. "Not too good, either." She was held for a moment by the twisted grin he gave her, then shrugged a shoulder and said she'd go see how Nora was coming with the hot water.

When he was alone he closed his eyes, and his thoughts were turmoil. He hadn't failed to notice Nora hadn't even spoken.

He heard a door open, and with an effort he raised his eyelids. He stared at her as she came into the room to halt before him. He wet his lips. "Anne."

"Lumpy told me you were here," she said. "Anything I can do?"

"Looks like you folks have done enough already."

"Sorry, Mel—you getting hurt. If I had seen you yesterday—"

"It would have made a difference?"

"Maybe." She sent a sideways glance towards the kitchen. "Why do you want to fight, Mel? My father can do a lot for you. He'll need somebody to take charge of the Circle-8 when he gets it—and it could be you."

He stared at her and slowly shook his head.

"Not even if I ask it?"

He looked at Mrs. Brown and Nora who were coming from the kitchen. He remembered bitterly how Nora had treated him, even hinting that he had had something to with Frank Lonigan's death. Why should he struggle to try to save the ranch for her?

At the same time Anne was offering him a place with Ace Bradley, and behind her words there was another promise.

Anne's gaze was holding silently on him, and he had to make a decision. He found, though, when he had spoken it had not been hard. "It would still be no." he said.

The pressure of her suppressed anger shook her. She would have struck back with hot words except that just then Lumpy and the doctor came in from the street, and she left quietly during the fluttering confusion Mrs. Brown created as she began to get things ready for the job that had to be done. Not until the medico had gone to work on his arm did Mel notice that she was no longer there.

"Box-T outfit's hit town," Lumpy told Mel. "Ace and Stack are at the Spread Eagle talking about a Circle-8 calf with a Box-T cow. They've got a man outside waiting for you."

"Those mixed brands are their work. Where's the sheriff?"

"Out of town."

The doctor rammed his probe deep in the wound, paused a second when Mel flinched and then completed the swab.

Lumpy seemed about to say something more but only smacked his lips. He moved to the door and silently slipped outside.

THE doctor finished with Mel's arm, bandaged it, and put it in a sling. "Take things easy for a few days," he said, "and you'll be all right."

Mrs. Brown bobbed her head. "He can stay here for the rest of the night. We'll make up a bed on the couch."

Mel said, "Thanks." But he had no intention of staying here. He was going to the saloon and have it out with the outfit. If he was to be shot, it wouldn't be from behind some bush or through a window.

When the doctor left he slipped into a shirt and buckled on his cartridge belt. He rose and walked into the kitchen, halting when Nora spoke.

"Mel. Where are you going?"

"Got a little business to tend to."

"No!" She rushed to the door, turned with her back to it. "I won't let you. They'll kill you."

"Looks like they're set on it anyway. Might as well give them a run for their money. Will you step aside or do we make a racket so that hombre out front will know what's going on?"

"Don't think you're doing this for me," Nora said.

"Got some interests of my own at stake." He grinned.

"We'll put out the lamp so the light won't show in the yard," Nora said.

Mel started for the door. Nora slowly moved to one side. Nora put out the light.

Mel stepped outside and the latch clicked behind him. He waited on the back porch for seconds, and when he was sure the man in front of the house would not come after him, he stole through the yard to the alley.

He worked towards town, crossed the street leading to the plaza. After a bit he barked his shins against an empty beer keg, and knew he had arrived at the rear of the Spread Eagle. He fumbled for the door. With his hand on the knob he paused. Now that he was here pain began throbbing in his arm. The thought flashed in his mind that he need not go in there; he could go back the way he had come and in the morning pull out of the country. Yet as the idea formed he knew that if he did he would once more be a saddle tramp.

He opened the door and stepped inside, closed it after him. He advanced to the end of the bar, and as he approached it he whipped his glance about the room.

Bradley was near the bar's center. Stack Jones was with him. Several riders were in the room, and Mel wondered which were Box-T. Lumpy was talking with E. J. Hawley on the north side of the room.

Coldness hit Mel when he saw the man sitting in a chair up towards the front. It was Shorty, one of the three who'd jumped him and Lonigan in Tasajera.

The man saw him. He let out a screech

and started to get up but sagged back down on the chair.

A stillness like that which precedes a thunder storm settled over the crowd. Mel tensed, wondering from which direction the first shot would come.

Before anything happened, though, Ace Bradley barked, "Hold it, boys! I'll handle this."

THE men at the bar moved back, leaving an open space between them. Ace growled, "Well?"

Mel felt the powers of the man. He couldn't retreat now, though. Nor did he want to. "Guess it's time for you and me to come to an understanding, Ace," he said.

"Made myself clear the other day. I'll tell you again, Tyler—get out!"

"And if I don't—maybe get bushwhacked—huh? Like this afternoon? Or you'll make out I'm throwing a long loop and there's a Box-T cow with a Circle-8 calf so the law'll take me?"

Ace leveled a cold stare at him. Mel wet his lips. "Or will a gang jump me—like Buck and Tick and Shorty, who gunned poor old Frank Lonigan when he was looking for some cows that had strayed."

He'd hurled his challenge. He was staking everything on a simple card, and the turn of it would tell whether Bradley would accept the challenge. But Ace said nothing, as if he wanted to be sure of his anger before he spoke.

Shorty, however, took no time to weigh things in his mind. His brain could grasp only the fact that here was one who'd taken a hand in that fracas and could tell what had happened down there. He wasn't certain either if the boss would cut the fellow down before enough was said to put a hangman's noose about somebody's neck.

Stealthily, he drew his sixgun, thumbed the hammer. As he let go, however, someone yelled, "Hey—there!" The slug went wild.

The explosion resolved everything. Mel dragged at his Colt, Bradley going for his own at the same time. Lumpy's yelp lashed at him: "Watch out for Stack!"

Mel traded shots with Ace. He saw Bradley stagger and reach for the edge of the bar for support.

Mel swung to face Stack Jones. A slug slashed across his thigh. He went backward against the mahogany.

Stack was throwing down on him again. Mel saw him through the swirl of powder-smoke, and a premonition stabbed at him that this one of Stack's had his name on it.

He brought his Colt level, pressed the trigger a fraction of a second before Stack fired. The flames darting from the two muzzles seemed to leap towards each other and merge into a single, blinding flash.

It lasted no longer than a streak of lightning. When it was gone and his eyes began to get into focus once more, he saw Jones stumbling forward.

The lead had torn into the man's chest. He reached for something to hold himself up and grabbed only air.

Even while Stack hung there, Mel swiveled his attention back to Bradley. Ace was slowly crumpling to the floor.

Weariness dragged at Mel. Pain sliced through his arm again and knifed at his brain. He wanted to sit down and rest.

He glanced at Shorty. Drawing deep from the well of his strength, he raised his Colt.

The hombre had no more fight, though. What he'd seen had convinced him he'd rather take a chance with a jury. He dropped his gun.

"Talk," Mel growled. "And talk fast."

"It was the boss' idea. He said to go get Lonigan—"

Mel couldn't make out much of what the hombre was saying; a roaring had started in his head. He caught the sound of Lumpy's voice, however. The old man had hold of his arm.

(Continued on page 112)

HOG-TIED FOR THE HANGNOOSE

By

MILES T. OVERHOLT

John Gilmore had two witneses who could snatch the hangman's noose from his innocent neck. But a mute can't talk—and a dead man won't!

"I guess you're right," Klafka said. Calmly he squeezed the trigger

JOHNNY GILMORE guessed it was about time to conclude the confab. "So you haze them juvenile bovines acrost the Sinks next Tuesday," he summarized, "and I'll meet you halfway with the *dinero*."

Buff Harkins grunted. "An' drive 'em onto your range yourself?"

"Sure. You can go get back home in a hurry then, jinglin' your filthy lucre," Johnny replied. "Have a drink."

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They took two, and then Harkins shuffled out.

Two-Fer-One Klafka was peering deep into his whiskey glass, seeing things. He was thinking what a fine place for a killing the Sinks were, those desolate flats, thirty miles across, where there could be no unseen witnesses. He could picture in his whiskey glass just how it could be arranged so that Johnny Gilmore would be set down as the killer.

"Joe," Johnny said to the bartender, "you ought to teach that licker of yours to rattle before it strikes. It's poisoner'n a snake."

He went out and over to the bank where he got the cash to pay for Buff Harkins' calves. Then he headed out across the upper end of the Sinks toward his prosperous little JG spread. But just before reaching the trail that would take him to his ranch, he turned his protesting horse toward the hills and cantered up a slope. Three miles farther along he came in sight of a cabin from whose rock chimney a thin spiral of smoke was curling.

He dismounted, and a clear-eyed young man grinned up at him from the door.

"Howya, Pete," Johnny whispered.

The youth's grin widened.

Johnny dismounted, taking some wrapped articles from his saddlebags, passing them over to the young man.

"Slab of bacon and such," he said.

The youngster didn't answer. There was a reason. He was a deaf mute. He had no other friend than Johnny. He had wandered to Johnny's ranch two months before on a decrepit pony.

Johnny gave the boy a little work to do, bought him some clothing to replace his rags, and, finally, located him in an old nester's cabin. The nester had abandoned his place and Johnny helped the young mute acquire it by paying the back taxes. The youngster did some trapping and fishing, and kept Johnny supplied with fresh venison and trout.

Pete could hardly wait to get Johnny into the cabin. His eyes were bright and there was a nervous quiver on his lips.

"You're all excited, Pete," Johnny said, watching him. "What's on your mind?"

Pete snatched up his pad and wrote: "That letter you brought Saturday was from my sister—my only relative. She sold our home place for $8000 and is coming out to live with me."

"Why, that's fine, Pete," Johnny said heartily. "You'll be able to make a real spread out of this place with that much *dinero*."

Pete nodded, writing again: "I've got to fix up the cabin better. It's hardly fit for a woman."

"I'm goin' into town Monday," Johnny said. "I'll get some curtains and woman beddin' and stuff. Make out a list. I'll take a pack animal so I can bring a load."

Pete's eyes expressed his thanks. He nodded. While Johnny threw some supper together, Pete wrote out the list. He would be able to pay Johnny when his sister arrived. Johnny rode home at sundown.

Later that night a cowboy left a note with Buff Harkins. It read:

> Wish you'd drive them calves over Monday, instead of Tuesday. I got a trip to make Tuesday.
>
> Johnny Gilmore

Buff swore, but went about gathering the calves he had sold to Johnny.

Johnny's two riders were over in Cedar Brakes, chousing out strays, and would not return until the end of the week. The young cowman was, therefore, all alone in the house Sunday night. Shortly after midnight a figure stole through the darkness back of the stable and glided to the house, slipped noiselessly inside.

The marauder stole over to the bunk where Johnny lay sleeping. With a swift, chopping motion he brought down his gun, and Johnny's head sank deeper into the pillow. The night prowler grinned crookedly.

One blow was enough. Turning quickly out to the corral, he caught up Johnny's pinto gelding which, he knew, was wearing a broken shoe. He saddled the horse, mounted and rode out.

BUFF HARKINS, pushing the bawling calves ahead of him, appeared in the Sinks about noon. His customary grouch left for a moment when he saw the rider approaching on Gilmore's calico pony. But his eyes widened when he observed Two-Fer-One Klafka was riding the horse. Klafka rode up to him.

"What the hell you doin' on Johnny's hoss?" Buff wanted to know.

" 'Tendin' to business—as usual." Two-Fer-One grinned, flipping out Johnny's six-gun from Johnny's holster. "An' now, if yuh don't mind, gimme that bill-of-sale you got in your pocket!"

"Oh, like that, huh?"

"Naw, quite some different," Klafka growled. "Hand it over damn sudden."

Harkins grew pale about the mouth. His jaw drooped open a little. He passed over the filled-out bill-of-sale. "What's it all about?" he demanded, his voice shrill. "Hell, you can't get away with no such doin's!"

"I guess you're right," Klafka said. Calmly he squeezed the trigger.

Harkins groped for the saddlehorn, missed it and pitched to the ground. Klafka grinned as he watched. Riding in then, he scattered the calves, turned and rode back to the JG.

All was quiet about the ranchyard. Quickly, he unsaddled Johnny's horse and drove it into the corral. Making his cautious way to the house, he went inside. Johnny was still unconscious.

Klafka replaced Johnny's gun-belt on its customary nail, slipped Buff Harkins' bill-of-sale into the cowboy's pocket, then went out and down to a patch of shrubbery where his own horse had been tethered. Mounting, he rode in a round-about way up the valley, crossed over and headed for his own ranch, which adjoined that of Buff Harkins' little spread on Coyote Creek.

"Which sure as hell fixes things purty," he thought to himself, beaming as he rode in at his own place. "I kin now buy Harkins' layout for a song, and what a sweet spread that'll make of the Lazy K."

He turned his horse into the corral and went into his shack, still exulting. "Slickest piece of work I ever done," he chortled. "Sheriff'll find the bill-o'-sale and dough in Gilmore's pocket—where I hid it—and that'll give him the motive—gettin' them calves for nothin'."

It was not until Monday night that Gilmore returned to consciousness. With a groan, he stirred erect in his bunk. His head felt as if he had left it out all winter. His hand groped to the bump.

He got up, legs shaking, made a light and took a look around the house. Nothing was amiss. He made some coffee-royal with the pint of whiskey he'd brought home from town, and felt better after awhile. He looked at his watch. It was only eight o'clock. Something was wrong. He'd gone to bed at nine o'clock. His watch was still running; so was the tin clock in the kitchen. He couldn't believe he had been knocked out for nearly twenty-four hours, but his time-piece told that kind of a story.

"In that case, it must be Monday night," he said to himself. "Buff Harkins is headin' this way in the mornin' and I got to meet him."

He went back to bed after a while and slept fitfully until daybreak. Later, when he went out to the corral, the pinto neighed at him critically.

"Huh? What've I done, feller?" inquired Johnny. "Sort of neglected you, huh?"

He watered and fed him, then cooked himself some breakfast. The bump had gone down and his head felt better. Feeling stronger, he saddled the pony and headed out toward the Sinks.

Meanwhile, Two-Fer-One Klafka had

saddled a fresh mount and ridden across the Sinks. Buff Harkins' body was still lying where he had watched it fall the day before. Ascertaining that, he rode swiftly to town and to Sheriff Fred Bell's office.

"Somebody salivated Buff Harkins," he told the lawman. "I was ridin' acrost the Sinks, headin' for Joe Bogue's place to look at some steers, when I found him. Been dead mebbe three-four hours. I didn't look clost."

When, with the sheriff, he raced across the flats to the murder scene, Johnny Gilmore was examining the body. Johnny looked up when he saw the lawman.

"It's Buff Harkins," he said, grimly. He paused, his eyes widening as a thought occurred to him. "How come you found out about it?"

"Klafka found him," Bell said. Then, after a few minutes examination: "You was to meet him here today, wasn't you? Le's see your gun."

Johnny nodded as he passed it over.

"One exploded shell," the sheriff commented. Johnny looked surprised. The lawman got to his feet. "Better ride into town with us, Johnny," he said. "Where's Buff's hoss?"

"Search me," Johnny said.

Bell packed the body across his saddle.

IN ABOUT an hour after they got back the coroner had extracted the bullet which had gone through Harkins' heart and lodged in the back. It was a .45. It fitted Johnny's gun. Johnny Gilmore went to jail.

"Did you search him?" Klafka probed the sheriff. "Might find some other evidence."

Bell did then, and found the bill-of-sale.

"Kinda cinches it," Klafka leered.

Kay DeBye, Pete's sister, arrived at Cold Springs on Wednesday. Pete, after waiting two days for Johnny Gilmore to show up at his cabin, had walked into town, a long, hot trek. Pete told Kay all about Johnny Gilmore. He'd learned, through devious ways, about the arrest, as well as other details.

"Can't we do something for him?" Kay, who was neither deaf nor mute, asked. "I've got that eight thousand dollars with me," she said. "Take it, Pete, and bail him out. Use whatever you need."

While Kay went to the Palace Hotel, Pete found his way to the jail. He scribbled his desires on his little tablet, only to learn that murder was not a bailable crime, that the trial was to come up within a week. When Kay learned of it, she obtained permission to see Johnny.

"I'm Kay DeBye, Peter's sister," she told Johnny at the bars of his cell. "I want to help you. You've been so very kind to Peter. He told me all about you. He thinks an awful lot of you."

Johnny grinned but shook his head. "I don't see what you can do," he told her, his eyes glowing at the sight of her finely-carved face and her lithe, rounded, youthful figure. "All I know is—I didn't do it. I been tryin' to figger it out. I was framed, but damned if I know why—or who's behind it."

"Well, we'll do something—Peter and I," Kay said. "We need you—for a neighbor."

Herb Hanna was young, but smart. He was no match for District Attorney E. Harris Swerington, but he was a good lawyer.

"Come clean, Johnny," he told his client. "I've got to know everything."

"You already know everything," Johnny said. "I got a bump on the *cabeza* which put me out for a whole damn day. We got to start from there."

"Which is no place at all to start from," Hanna said. "Who's that girl who's been hanging around here every day?"

"Pete DeBye's sister," Johnny told him. "She just got in town from back East somewhere. She couldn't be of any help."

But Hanna went to see her, anyway.

The district attorney made a good showing when the trial opened. It was obviously a dead open-and-shut case.

All the cowmen in the country were in

the courtroom, it seemed, including Two-Fer-One Klafka, who was a witness.

The prosecution exhibited the bill-of-sale which had been found duly signed, in Johnny Gilmore's pocket.

"The motive," the district attorney said, "is plain. Gilmore saw a splendid chance to pull a murder there on the flats, too far from any possible detection. You know, gentlemen of the jury, that no one could, by any far stretch of the imagination, hide within five miles of the scene of the murder. A witness would be impossible."

He went on then to prove that Johnny Gilmore had made an appointment with Harkins to meet him in the middle of the Sinks—a strange appointment indeed. Four witnesses testified to the fact. But the motive was clear—Gilmore wanted Harkins out there where he could kill him without suspicion. It was a simple method of acquiring a herd of young stock.

But Gilmore had made several slips, the prosecutor went on to point out. Jason Klafka had accidentally found the body; he had trailed Gilmore's horse to the JG ranch. The tracks were easily read because the pinto pony was wearing a broken shoe. There was an exploded shell in Gilmore's gun, and the bullet which had killed Harkins had come from it. So—there was the murderer, Johnny Gilmore!

The jury and the spectators were convinced. Johnny Gilmore was obviously guilty. Why, he didn't even have an alibi to prove his innocence.

Two-Fer-One Klafka was placed on the stand by the district attorney. Yes, he had found the body as he was riding across the Sinks; he had trailed the slayer's horse tracks. He hated to testify against Johnny Gilmore, who was his friend, but those were the facts.

The prosecutor finished with Klafka, and Herb Hanna took him in hand.

"Mr. Klafka," he said, "with the Court's permission, I would like to read a report of a verbatim conversation which was held out there in the upper end of the Sinks last Monday, so that you may verify it."

The judge frowned, and waited.

"Mr. Klafka," Hanna went on, smilingly, "listen close to this and see if you remember any of it." Then he read:

"Howya, Buff."

"What the hell you doin' on Johnny's hoss?"

"'Tendin' to business—as per usual. An' now, if you don't mind, gimme that bill-o'-sale you got in your pocket!"

"Oh, like that, huh?"

"Naw, quite some different. Hand it over damn sudden."

"What's it all about? Hell, you can't get away with no such doin's."

"I guess you're right."

Hanna turned to the jury. "Then, gentlemen," he concluded, "came the report of a six-shooter, and Buff Harkins died."

The district attorney, who had been trying to object all along, now jumped up. Vehemently, he insisted that no such evidence could be admissable—whatever the defense attorney was trying to get at.

The judge rapped for order. He turned on Hanna with a frown. "Just what is all this you've been reading?"

Herbert Hanna said, "Your Honor, it is, as I said in the beginning, a verbatim conversation between Buff Harkins and his murderer."

Meanwhile, no one was paying any attention to Two-Fer-One Klafka, whose face had gone white under his tan. He had wilted in his seat on the witness stand.

Hanna addressed him sharply. "Is that the actual conversation, Klafka?"

"I dunno nothin' about what happened out there," Klafka snarled. "How could I?"

Hanna smiled enigmatically. Klafka's eyes were distorted and his lips twitched. He was greatly relieved when he was dismissed. The district attorney had no more witnesses. Herb Hanna motioned to Pete DeBye, who nodded, instead of speaking, when he was sworn in.

HANNA quickly explained that his witness was a deaf mute and asked that a clerk be appointed to read the testimony. This was granted and the clerk of the court acted as the reader. Herb Hanna wrote his first question, and the clerk read it aloud before passing it to Pete. It asked:

"Do you swear that the conversation just read passed between Buff Harkins and his murderer last Monday at about 11:30 o'clock?"

Pete vigorously nodded his head.

The district attorney again objected violently. How could a deaf and dumb man "hear" a conversation anywhere?

So Herbert Hanna wrote and the clerk read, "How do you know this conversation took place out there in the middle of the Sinks, as you state?"

Pete wrote rapidly on his pad for a moment, then the clerk read, "Johnny Gilmore was to bring me some merchandise from town on Monday, I expected him about noon. So at about 11:30 I turned my powerful field glasses in the direction of town and saw two men meet. One was riding Gilmore's horse. I saw what they said. I saw the shooting. It was so vivid a scene that I remembered the conversation."

The prosecutor shouted, "How in all creation could you 'remember' a conversation no one could possibly hear?"

Herb Hanna grinned. "He can't hear you," he said, "but I'll ask him."

The reply came back: "I am a lip reader. The field glasses brought them plenty close enough for me to read their words clearly."

Johnny's attorney wrote: "If the man who shot and killed Buff Harkins is in the courtroom, can you point him out?"

The jury and spectators watched in awed silence. Pete arose slowly—and leveled a finger at Two-Fer One Klafka.

Two-Fer-One bellowed, "It's a damn lie!" Then he went for his gun, fumbled, and Pete DeBye, leaping from his chair, grasped Gilmore's six-shooter, which had been lying on a table as one of the exhibits. He thrust it into the prisoner's hand.

When Klafka's first shot missed Pete, Johnny swung into action. His first bullet caught Klafka in the gun arm. The weapon clattered to the floor. But Klafka jerked up a second gun from the waistband of his overalls with his left hand and fired again.

Then Johnny got his bearings, and a well placed shot broke Klafka's left arm. By that time Sheriff Bell had Klafka.

The judge ordered Johnny freed. "By his actions, Klafka admitted his guilt," the Court held. And while undergoing an operation at the little hospital conducted by Doc White, the coroner, Klafka confessed.

When Johnny Gilmore walked out of the courtroom with his name cleared, Pete DeBye and his sister, Kay, met him.

"Thanks, Pete, old feller," Johnny grinned.

And Pete, reading Johnny's lips, understood him.

Kay DeBye came forward. "It was so little to do, but I'm glad—for the first time in my life—that Peter can't talk."

"He talked plenty this time," Gilmore said.

"Now what?" smiled Kay DeBye.

"Why, I done figgered, practically on the spur of the moment, as you might say, that you and Pete can't live in that dang cabin while I got so much room that ought to be taken up at the ranch," Johnny said. "So I thought mebbe we—us three—could kinda—you know—move into my ranch—like—like—well, like one family."

"Pete would like that." Kay smiled demurely.

"And you?"

"It runs in the family," Kay said. "I'm just about as silly as Pete—about falling for people."

Johnny swallowed hard, and blinked his eyes—but he kissed her before they started up the street together. Kay Gilmore was a mighty pretty name. . . . ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

KILLER'S BACKFIRE

By RICHARD FERBER

Vengeance-mad Lute Colton roamed the tall and lonely snows to pay for five long, hot years of prison Hell—with one cold rifle shell!

THE wind whipped snow across the slope and beat it against Colton's face. He pulled the collar of the cowhide parka higher around his neck and jerked the hat down. The wind caught the brim again and snapped it back against the crown. Snow had begun to settle in a patch on the mare's rump. She sank deep into a

"I'm coming back!" Lute shouted. "I'm giving you just a little more time!"

drift and came floundering out. Colton drew rein and steered her toward the stand of jack-pine. She stopped, head down, in the quieter air of the trees.

Lute fumbled inside the parka and brought out tobacco and papers. He began to roll a cigarette against the spasmodic lashings of the wind, and his features grew harder with the concentration. His lids half-closed over the gray eyes and the lines along his mouth tightened. The first stubble of a beard darkened his chin, grew back and disappeared within the handkerchief that was tied around his ears. His lean body sat motionless in the saddle, and he ceased the work for a moment to consider the growing numbness in his legs. The wind snatched at the paper, crumpling it and scattering the tobacco. He gave it up and threw the paper away.

The mare was still blowing from the pull up the slope. He put his hands inside the parka and decided to let her rest for a few minutes longer. There was little protection leeward of the jack-pines. He shuddered and tried to hunch deeper in the warmth of the parka. *It's damned cold,* he thought, *but it's going to be worth it.* He had been telling himself that all the way up to the pass, and through it, and now across these hills toward the lower valley. He hadn't thought of turning back, even when he had stopped feeling the sting of the snow on his face. He had kept on, knowing that in an hour perhaps, he would see the kid, Jess Wilks, again. That thought alone was enough.

It had been almost five years since he had seen the kid, five years of waiting for a time like this. He imagined how the kid would look when he recognized him. He'd show his yellow streak; in five years a man could change some, but he didn't change like that. He thought of the girl and tried to push the remembrance of her from his mind. His anger mounted uncontrollably. He had to hold himself to keep from heeling the mare back into the drifts.

In a way it was his own fault. He'd been a fool to trust the kid, trust him with a job or with his woman. And it had cost him five years of his life, rotting in a cold and stinking prison. He sat engulfed in his own anger and let his thoughts travel back.

Remembering the woman was the bitterest part. But it wasn't only that. It was the fifty thousand dollars in the Pellville bank that they'd never seen, and one of his men lying dead in the street. And the way the crowd had come up on them from the alley where the kid was supposed to be watching.

He hadn't learned what had happened until later. The posse didn't bother to chase the kid, he had too much of a head start. He'd come back afterwards, though, for the woman—his, Lute Colton's, woman. And they'd left Colton to rot in jail.

Well, the kid would pay for it, pay for every minute. He'd put a slug in his soft belly and watch him die, slowly, so the girl could see what it was like. He pulled his lips tight against his teeth and let the picture move steadily in his mind. Finally, when he could see it no longer, he reined the mare and turned her into the driving wind of the slope.

The hills began to fall away and he rode into thicker timber. Pines and cedars stood in clusters like islands on the white smoothness of the snow. The pony labored through the drifts and in the shallow patches kicked up clumps of black dirt and needles. Looking back, he saw that it made an obvious trail. It didn't matter, the way the snow was falling. He raked the mare with the spurs, trying to send her into greater speed. She was already winded again. He didn't care now. He kept her going; it was another hour before he came through the pines and saw the cabin in the canyon below him.

HE DISMOUNTED and moved closer to the brink of the slope. The cabin lay huddled in the snow drifts. The corral

stood a little off from it, fronting a long, low barn. A stream ran nearby, hidden except where the snow had banked at its edges. This would be the place, he decided. The man in the little town at the other side of the pass had told him to look for the first ranch at the head of the valley. He pivoted to glance back the way he had come. The valley was too narrow here; there could be no ranch further back.

He turned again to the cabin. He lingered for a moment before mounting again. There was some satisfaction in the squalid scene below him. A dirty nester's claim, by the looks of it. Five years had done little for Jess Wilks in the way of prosperity. It brought a fleeting smile to his face, a smile without humor. He untied the lower strings of the parka and took the glove off his right hand. Then he stepped to the leather, reined the mare down the steep rise and circled the cabin to the building beyond.

The wind had risen, picking up the loose snow and casting it in great swirls through the trees. There was no chance of his being seen or heard from the cabin. He rode on to the barn, and once inside took his time unsaddling. The blanket was soaked with sweat and had begun to freeze. He hung it up, found another one and threw it over the mare's back. He led her into a stall, tied her and tossed in an armload of hay. When he was finished, he picked up the rifle, took the Colt from the holster and went outside. A light shone through the curtained window of the cabin. He moved around the building, floundering in the snow a little, and came to the door. He saw that the latch string was inside and he smiled, then laid a heavy hand on the thick board.

A muffled voice answered him from inside: "Who's that?"

"A friend," Colton called above the wind.

He listened for the approaching footsteps, but he couldn't hear them. He brought back the hammer of the Colt. His hand was white with cold, but there seemed to be a sudden heat in it. His finger tightened on the trigger. An instant later the door was thrown wide and he saw the figure of the kid, Jess Wilks, in the opening.

His finger took up the slack in the trigger, but abruptly he let it relax. That was too simple, too easy for the kid. He pushed past Wilks, ignoring the kid's gun, and came into the sudden warmth of the room. The girl was standing by the fireplace. He let his weight settle on one leg and looked at her. Five years had made their changes. They had softened her, though he could still see the stiff pride in her eyes. Her hair glistened in the light from the fire. She seemed different. He remembered her in the lush gowns that his money had bought for her, not in the plainness of a nester's gingham. Still, the light of her moved him. He started to smile once again, and held it back.

The girl came forward hesitantly and stopped. Jess Wilks moved around him, the gun still raised He bent forward a little, staring, and his mouth opened in surprise. He lowered the pistol slowly.

"Expecting someone?" Colton asked sarcastically.

The kid stammered. His smooth, even features distorted and his eyes narrowed. He ran a hand through his sand-colored hair. "Not you," he said bluntly, and glanced toward the girl.

Colton took off his hat and tossed it toward the bed in the corner. He leaned the Winchester near the door and unfastened the handkerchief from around his head, tying it again at his neck. He pulled off the parka and let it slump stiffly against the wall. He let his gaze work methodically around the cabin. It was one room, with lean-to at the back, and the rough, handhewn furniture of the poor rancher. *What could she see in this?* he thought He looked at the girl.

"You got any coffee?" he asked her.

The girl hadn't moved. He saw the fear

shading the color of her eyes but he met the onset of her stare, his own gaze cold and unwavering, and waited until she turned away. He walked to the table. A tin cup stood at one end of it. He pushed it aside and sat down. Wilks stayed where he was, his hands loosely at his sides, his face still twisted with surprise.

"You can put down that gun now," Lute told him casually. "It won't do you any good."

The kid glanced at the gun. He went to the dresser and slipped it back in the drawer and then came over to the table. He pulled out a chair and stood reluctantly for a moment and finally sat down. He kept his eyes on the rough boards in front of him.

Colton said, "I guess you weren't figurin' on seeing me, Jess?"

Wilks swung his eyes up. "No. No, I wasn't, Lute."

Colton laughed. He watched the girl place the two cups on the table. He took her by the arm, his grip pressing into the softness of her flesh, and studied her interestedly. Still holding her, he turned his glance to the kid.

"You think she's worth it?" he asked. "You think she's worth what's going to happen to you?"

The kid's body tensed. He spread both hands on the table. "Listen, Lute—" he started. His voice trailed off helplessly.

Colton let go of the girl. He picked up the coffee and held the hot edge of it to his lips. She was worth it, all right. Even now, waiting to kill this man, he could understand that. He let his mind dwell on her for a moment, torturing himself with his memory of her. There was almost a pleasure in thinking of it—and of what he was going to do to the kid. He leaned forward in the chair and laid his arms on the table.

"You were a fool, Jess," he said lightly. "Did you figure hidin' up in this hole was going to make any difference? Did you think I wouldn't find you?"

The kid's fingers tightened flat against the table. "I don't know, Lute," he said tonelessly. Then his voice rose. "But listen, Lute. You've got to listen. It wasn't the way you think. I ran out on you, sure, but I was scared. You know what it's like to be scared?"

COLTON looked at the girl. She said nothing. For an instant he saw the fear in her eyes, and he enjoyed it. But there was a resentment there, too. He glanced away. His eyes roamed idly about the room.

"Funny," he said with mock kindliness. "I didn't think of it that way, Jess. I figured you ran out on me so you could get Martha, here. That wasn't hard, once you got me out of the way. Still, maybe I was wrong."

The kid looked up hopefully, then saw Colton's expression. He stood up and began pacing the floor. Martha came over to the table, took his chair and sat down. She seemed suddenly tired. She hadn't spoken before. Now her voice was soft and lifeless.

"It was my fault, Lute. I want you to believe that."

He didn't; he watched her quizzically and remained silent.

"It was my idea, Jess," she went on. "I don't mean letting you go to prison. But running away. I couldn't stand it anymore."

"Stand what?" he asked roughly. "You had everything you wanted." His anger rose. It was true; he'd found her in a cheap dance hall and given her everything—everything that his money and his gun could buy her. And what did she have now? Nothing but the dirty squalor of a nester's shack and the plainness of a nester woman's clothes. He looked around the interior of the cabin again. The floor was rough and showed the marks of constant scrubbing. He swung his eyes back to her, wondering. Bitterness swept over him and was a hammering in his brain.

He pushed himself up from the table.

"No, you didn't have everything you wanted." His voice was a shout. He pointed at Wilks. "You wanted him."

The girl nodded calmly. "I tried not to Lute. I'm sorry. But I gave you no promise."

His anger faded; he sat down. "It doesn't matter," he said quietly. He ran a hand over his face and dropped it. The coldness came back to his eyes, and he smiled a little. He let the woman see the twisting of his mouth. He said, "No, it won't matter, not to Jess here. It'll matter to you, though. You're gonna have to watch him crawl when I put the first bullet in his gut. Did you ever see a man with a bullet in his gut? You'd better remember, because it might help you."

He stood up, still smiling. The girl came around the table and stepped in front of him, her fingers clutching at his shirt. "Don't, Lute," she screamed. "Please don't." He pushed her gently aside. Across the room Wilks had stopped his pacing and made a half-turn toward him. His face was white and his eyes rounded. He stared at Colton's gun and than lifted his gaze. His voice trembled when he spoke.

"You won't listen, Lute, and maybe I don't blame you. But that was five years ago. Can't you forget what happened then?"

The girl was clinging to Colton's arm now. He shoved past her, wrenching free. Wilks stood without moving; he started to bring his hands up and let them drop again. Lute watched him for a moment, and without warning drove a fist to the kid's stomach. The kid saw it too late; he doubled up, groaning, and tried to pivot away. Colton stepped aside and caught him full on the mouth. The blow jerked the kid upright. His body curved back and he fell against the log wall. He made an effort to hold his feet and then slumped into a sitting position. The girl screamed and ran toward him.

Colton grabbed her by the arm. "Don't worry," he said. "It's only a beginning."

He held her until she relaxed. Wilks got to his knees and rubbed his jaw silently. Looking down at him, Colton felt some of the anger draining from him. He rubbed the knuckles of his hand. He had expected more pleasure from the action. Still, he'd get it. He reached down and pulled Wilks to his feet.

"Saddle my horse, Jess," he said.

Wilks started to speak, but Colton cut him off. "You heard me, Jess. Start moving."

The kid fumbled with the latch string and finally opened the door. The blast of air scattered snow on the board floor and sent the flame in the lamp chimney to wavering. The kid hesitated, eyeing Colton curiously, and then disappeared into the snow. Lute listened to the sound of his boots till it was gone. He turned to the girl. He saw the brightening of her face.

"You're leaving?" she said hopefully.

He laughed. "I'm leavin', but I'm coming back." He saw the darkness in her eyes again and he went on cruelly. "A little time's better than nothing. You can watch him squirm, figurin' out how he's gonna keep from getting killed. And you can think, Martha, think about those five years I spent while you were runnin' off with another man."

She lifted her hands pleadingly. Fear made its course over her face, taking the color from it. She moved away from him and stopped, turning back. "Oh, Lute," she said desperately. "Can't you see? This is why I left you. I wanted a man, not a killer."

"Maybe you got what you wanted," he said coldly. "You won't have him long."

He started to open the door. She came back to him, stepping between him and the opening. She put both hands flat on his shirt-front. "Is it me that you want, Lute? If it is, I'll go with you now. Please, Lute."

He placed his hands on her shoulders and for a minute felt the old tenderness that he had once had for her. Or was it tender-

ness? He couldn't remember—it had been too long; and there was the hate, and the jealousy. It came back to him immediately. He pushed her away.

"There's only one thing I want," he said evenly. "Nothing you can say is going to stop me."

Wilks had brought the horse into the yard. Colton picked up the rifle and went outside. He swung into the saddle and yelled to Wilks above the wind. "Where's the town, Jess?"

Wilks pointed through the white flurries of snow. "Down the valley. You'll see the road when you get out of the trees. You coming back, Lute?"

"I'm coming back!" Lute shouted. He laughed, raising his voice so the kid could hear it. "You've had five years, Jess. I'm givin' you just a little more time."

THE snow had already begun to settle on the kid's clothes. His body shook with the cold. He raised one hand above his eyes to see through the beating snow, but he didn't speak. Colton reined the mare around and rode past him. When he reached the first stand of pines and looked back the kid was still standing there, and in the light of the doorway he saw the girl. He heeled the mare over the rise and dropped out of sight of them in the rolling whiteness.

He found the road a mile down the valley and turned onto it. A fence ran along the wooded side and the snow had banked up there. It was easier riding on the wagon path, and he let the mare out to a trot. For awhile he noticed only his surroundings. Then his mind drifted back to the cabin and the kid and the girl. He felt a growing dissatisfaction.

It hadn't gone off as he had wanted it to. The cold pleasure that he had expected wasn't there. He should have killed Wilks immediately; the pleasure would be in that. But he had waited this long and meant to make the most of this final meeting. *Wilks will pay,* he thought angrily; *he'll pay with his blood.* He settled back in the saddle and brought up the images of the man again, and found that those images came with increasing effort.

The town lay on the flatness of the valley, but he was within a hundred yards of it before he saw the lights. It had grown dark now and the lanterns appeared mist-covered along the street. The wind had died down and the snow fell only lightly. He rode up the street until he came to the first saloon and steered the mare into the rack. A half-dozen ponies stood in front of the sidewalk. He dismounted and untied the parka as he moved toward the door.

Inside he paused, swinging his eyes quickly through the interior. There were only a few customers in the place. In one corner five men were playing cards at a round, battered table. He moved to the bar, threw the parka back and settled down on one elbow. The barkeep came over, carrying a bottle and glass, and put them in front of him. Colton poured a drink without looking at the man and took it in a quick gulp.

He let his gaze move more slowly about the place now. Through the mirror on the back bar he could see the pot-bellied stove, glowing red around the edges of the door. A piano stood unused at the back of the room. He brought his attention to the men at the table. He considered a game of poker and let the idea go. He turned back and poured into the glass again and this time took the liquor slowly.

He had his head tilted when his eyes caught the movement of the man at the table. The man had twisted in the chair and was watching him. Colton lowered the glass gently and eased about so that he was directly facing the back bar. He felt the holster come clear and he put both hands on the edge of the plank. The man stood up and came toward him. He was tall and stick-thin, and there was something about the way he walked. Colton smiled thinly.

The stiffness left him and he swung about.

"Hello, Earhart," he said quietly.

The man cocked his head to one side and then came hurriedly forward.

"Damn it, I thought that was you, Colton," he said. His voice was low pitched and he spoke with a liquid-like drawl. He extended a hand to Colton. Lute shook it briefly. Earhart leaned sideways against the bar, his frame loose and seemingly disjointed. He cupped his chin in his hand and then brought the hand up to tilt the hat forward.

He said pleasantly, "Last time I heard of you, Lute, you was still braiding hair ropes."

Colton nodded and motioned to the barkeep for another glass. "I got out six months ago. I was kind of lookin' for you to show up there."

Earhart chuckled and fingered the brim of his hat. "No, I left Pellville so fast my pony wasn't even makin' tracks. I hear the rest of the boys didn't come out so well."

Colton poured two drinks and remained silent. His mind moved again to Wilks and the girl. Earhart had been with the bunch at the Pellville bank, but he had been lucky. When the crowd came up the alley where the kid was supposed to be on look-out, Earhart had been at the other end of the street. He had killed a man getting away, Lute had heard. And besides the kid, he was the only man who had ridden clear.

He raised his glass and glanced at Earhart over the top of it. He drank half of the whiskey and said, "What brings you into this country, Bob?"

Earhart smiled secretively. He rubbed a slim finger along his jutting nose. "A job," he said, amused. "I got me a job." He glanced suddenly at Colton, his eyes brightening. "Say," he drawled out, "you wouldn't be up here lookin' for that Wilks kid by any chance?"

Colton's eyes darted to the smiling face, and then back to the glass. "Wilks?" He shook his head lightly. "No."

"That's good," Earhart chuckled and draped himself against the bar again. "I thought for a minute there you might still be sore at him. I wouldn't like that much."

Colton finished the other half glassful of whiskey. He took out makings and began rolling a cigarette. "What do you mean, Bob?" he asked indifferently.

Earhart lowered his voice. "Why, I got me a job, taking care of Mr. Wilks. Good pay. I wouldn't want to see a man ruinin' it for me."

Colton started, and checked himself. His fingers pressed hard as he wrapped the paper around the tobacco, and he felt the thin wheat straw give. He dropped the torn paper to the floor, scattering the tobacco.

"Damn it," he said aloud, and repeated it to himself. He began to build another smoke. He cursed himself silently, ungently. What a fool, he thought, waiting like he had—thinking he could get more pleasure out of it that way. Now he had Earhart to contend with. For some reason Earhart was being paid to kill the kid. He wanted to laugh, and he forced it back. He twisted the end of the paper and put the cigarette in his mouth, lighting it.

He said, "The kid must be ridin' pretty tall."

Earhart twirled his glass. "A squatter," he said. "Something about water, though. I don't know. I don't ask any questions."

Colton drew deeply on the cigarette and exhaled, watching the smoke lift heavily in the dead air of the room. So that was it, he thought, That explained the latch string being on the inside of the cabin door, and Wilks' nervousness with the gun. He smiled inwardly. Well, the kid wouldn't have to worry about that. He wasn't going to die over some stupid nesters' feud. No, even if he, Colton, had to help him. He was saving the kid for something else.

He studied Earhart in the mirror. The man was trouble, he knew. Still, Earhart wouldn't be in any hurry. He'd get his

work done before Earhart started his. It was too bad. The man would be out whatever his friends were paying him. He smiled again.

EARHART pushed himself away from the bar. He went to the poker table, picked up his slicker and came back. The slicker made a crinkling sound as he forced his arms through the sleeves. When he had it on he waved to the barkeep for another bottle.

"With me," he said to Colton. "I hate to leave good company. But it's snowin' again. Snow's a mighty handy thing for coverin' tracks, and I'm a workin' man." He moved his mouth into a broad grin, showing the yellowed teeth.

Colton had to fight back his anxiousness. Once more he cursed himself. Then he shrugged mentally. There was only one thing to do now. It was Earhart's misfortune, not his. He hadn't waited these five years for nothing.

He lifted his glass to Earhart and tossed the whiskey down. Earhart finished his and pulled the slicker around him. "Lousy weather," he said. He smiled pleasantly and turned toward the door, already hunched against the expected drive of the snow. When he was gone Colton poured another glassful. He drank it with enforced slowness. The liquor was almost tasteless now. He looked concernedly at his hand. The whiskey had made it a little uncertain, he thought, but a few minutes in the snow would take that out of him. He put two silver dollars on the plank, nodded to the barkeep, and made his way casually outside.

Earhart was right; the snow was coming down hard again. The wind swept it along the wide street, enveloping him, all but blanking out the far sidewalk. The mare stood with head down, tail turned to the wind. He untied her, stepped to the stirrup and let her make her own way down the street. He could see only a few feet ahead through the swirling whiteness. He came to the fence and took the chance of kicking the pony into a hurrying trot.

After a mile he began to worry. The mare was dead tired, had been for two days now. He could see nothing ahead, only the thin vague outline of the fence. He stopped once, listening. He could hear nothing above the steady roaring, no tell-tale sound of a horse's slushing hoofbeats in the snow. He threw the spurs to the mare's heaving flanks and worked her into a long-paced rack. He watched the fence posts come up and fall behind him with a monotonous rapidity. He lashed the mare unmercifully now. He had driven her another mile before he saw the dim figure rise up in front of him and disappear again.

The mare lunged forward under his spurs and he shouted, "Earhart. That you, Earhart?"

The man came into view again, shadowy in the gray, spinning snowfall. He wheeled the horse around and sat tensely in the saddle. "Who is it?" he called.

"Lute. Lute Colton." The wind caught the words and whipped them away. Colton touched rein and moved in closer. "Colton," he said again.

Earhart bent forward, satisfying himself, and then sagged into huddled position on the leather. He said, "Funny night to be riding, Lute."

Colton swung the neck of the mare between himself and Earhart. His hand worked to the parka, edging it open. He said, "It's snowin' as hard for you as it is for me."

Earhart straightened again. "I told you, Lute. I'm a working man."

"Not any more you're not," Colton answered. He felt the butt of the gun under his palm. "Bob, you're trying to vent my brand."

For a moment Earhart was silent. Lute could hear the movement of the slicker. It made a tearing sound as it was pulled free. Then Earhart spoke against the chuckling

in his voice. "I figured you for that, Lute. You were never much of a man to forget." He paused, taking up the slack in the pony's reins, bringing the animal's head high. "But you wouldn't want to do an old friend out of a job, would you, Lute? This is money in my pocket. Two hundred dollars. You wouldn't do that, would you, friend?" His tone was easy, but there was the warning behind it.

Colton watched him, squinting through the gray and white of the snowfall. His fingers wrapped themselves around the butt of the Colt. His fore-finger slipped inside the trigger guard. "I will if I have to, Bob," he said softly.

"No," Earhart drawled. "No, you won't." The gun came out with a fluid motion, almost unseen. It made a muffled sound in the pressing atmosphere of the snow. The shot whined quietly past Colton's ear. He swung the mare and fired, and felt the sharp recoil in his hand. The pony went knee-deep in a drift and pulled herself up, bucking.

The figure of Earhart faded back into the gloom, and then he could see only the muzzle flash of the man's gun. He squeezed off at it and instantly sent the mare to moving again. The snow broke down on him, stinging his face, and cleared, and broke again. The mare came up against the fence and shied away. A slug tore through the snow at his feet. He reined off and stopped. He reached forward and patted the pony's neck, quieting her, listening for the sound of Earhart's moving. He heard nothing but the even roaring of the wind.

He waited, feeling the dragging time close in on him. The ungloved hand was beginning to grow numb with the cold. The mare stomped, too softly to be noticeable. To his right a slight crunching sound caught his ear. He shifted that way noiselessly. The mare was standing against the dark shadows of the trees. Earhart would be out there, moving, trying to place him against the greater lightness of the open valley. He brought the gun up, swinging it with the faint, uncertain sound. The wind increased, for a second thinning the snow, sweeping it across the road in a transparent sheet.

He saw the gray shape of the rider and fired. The slug made a dull thud in the man's body, and he fired again before Earhart could recover himself. The man stood upright in the saddle, then swayed sideward. He tried to grab the horn, and missed it. The pony sidled, tossing its head, and danced out from under him. He fell in the snow and didn't move.

IT TOOK him an hour to reach the head of the valley and struggle up through the trees to the canyon. Drawing rein on top of the rise, he dismounted and left the mare's reins hanging. The storm was getting worse, he had decided, and there was no point in going down there now. He would have to hurry to get across the pass. One quick shot would be enough, and his feeling for the job was somehow gone. It was a little amusing, he thought, killing Earhart to get at the kid. He hadn't expected it to turn out this way. The five years of waiting had promised something else. He had wanted to see the woman cry, and the kid's face turn sallow with fear. Perhaps the waiting, the anticipation was the best part. It didn't matter, he told himself. He would end it now.

He slipped the Winchester out of the saddle boot. He went to his knees, throwing the lever, and lay down in the snow. The stand of trees cut off the wind somewhat. He could see clearly. The cabin stood black against the whiteness behind it. Light glinted through the one window, and showed at the crack of the door. It would be warm down there, he thought without meaning to.

He worked the gloved finger over the trigger and gave out a long, echoing shout. "Wilks. Jess Wilks."

(Continued on page 113)

A grave each for a brother and a hangtree for his father brought Matt Hurst to Granada to lay claim to his bloody heritage. So, from that fortress of the damned, the word went out:

GUN THIS MAN DOWN!

Gripping Western Saga

MATT HURST stepped down off the train onto the wooden platform and eyed the town with eyes as bleak as the leaden sky. Snow drove along the ground before the biting January wind, forming tiny dunes as variable as a woman's moods.

He stood for a long moment while his mind digested the unpleasantness of his memories, then he picked up his carpetbag with his left hand, tossed his sacked saddle over his right shoulder and strode down the slight rise of ground between railroad station and town.

A man's eyes, resting on his home after five years, ought to show something besides this cold unfriendliness. Else why would a man come home? There were a

lot of reasons, he reflected, among them a deep need to understand the things that had happened, and a possibility of exacting vengeance.

A few scattered horses lined the town's hitchrails, rumps to the wind, tails whipping between their legs. A lone woman hurried along the street clutching her skirts to keep the wind from lifting them. Smoke rose briefly from half a hundred tin chimneys before the wind snatched it away. And on the far side of town, a school bell clanged for the noon hour.

Hurst looked at the town and cursed.

Six horsemen swept out of town, a short forty yards behind the fleeing Matt Hurst

The hotel, a yellow frame structure with a balcony across the front at the second story level, seemed to recoil from each new blast of wind, wind that came howling off the rolling sagebrush country to the north of town. Matt shouldered open the door, came into the lobby in a swirling cloud of snow, and dropped his bag and saddle beside the door.

Nothing changes, he thought as he looked around at the game heads hung from the smoky walls, at the worn red lobby carpet, littered as always with cigar ashes and cigarette butts. Nothing changed, not even the sour-faced, bespectacled room clerk, Rudy Littlefield.

Matt stepped across the lobby to the desk and flipped open the register. He signed *Matt Hurst* and looked up at Rudy, a mocking, challenging smile on his lips.

He wasn't a tall man, nor was he overly broad. Unprepossessing because his heavy sheepskin covered and concealed the long, smooth muscles of his shoulders, the deep power of his chest. Unprepossessing until you let your glance dwell on his cold gray eyes, on his mouth so thin and hard and bitter.

Littlefield breathed, "Matt Hurst! I thought you looked familiar. You've growed since I seen you last."

His eyes took on a gleeful excitement. Matt said drily, "Give me a room and the key to it. Then you can run out and tell the town I'm back."

Rudy eyed the low-swung Colt's revolver that peeped from beneath Matt's hip-length sheepskin. He said, "What you goin' to do, Matt?"

"Do? What should I do?"

Rudy flushed and stammered, "Well, you know—I mean, you come back to do somethin' about Dan an' Will an' Frankie, didn't you?"

Matt said, "A room and a key, Rudy."

Let them worry. Let them stew and wonder why he was back. Let them wonder because he was wondering himself. He hated the town and the people in it. He hated the slot they'd shoved him in ever since he was old enough to remember things.

Dell Tillman had always said, "You don't tame a wolf whelp by treating him good. He's what he is, and sooner or later he'll turn on you."

That was what Matt Hurst was—a wolf whelp. A wolf pup that had run away to keep from being smeared with the same brush that had tarred his father and his brothers. He knew now that he should have stuck.

If he had, maybe things would be different. Maybe Dan and Will and Frankie would still be alive.

Or maybe he should have stayed away. What could possibly be accomplished by returning? One man cannot obtain vengeance against an entire community. And even if he could, would not the very act of obtaining it hurt him more than it hurt the ones against whom he acted?

The carpeting on the steps was a little more frayed than Matt remembered, the hallways a little more dingy. Cooking odors from the hotel kitchen lifted up the stairwell and invariably announced what was being served at the next meal. Today it appeared to be sauerkraut. Matt felt the sudden pangs of hunger.

So immersed was he in his thoughts that he did not notice the girl until he was face to face with her. She stepped to one side to pass, and Matt, stepping aside himself, unwittingly moved the same way and found himself still facing her.

QUICKLY, embarrassedly, he stepped back, and the girl did the same. She laughed, a pleasant, musical laugh and said, "You stand still. I'll move aside."

Matt flushed, feeling like a fool. "All right," he growled. The girl kept her glance on him with a close interest that further flustered him. And he began to notice her for the first time.

Her hair was like honey in color, having a light yellow sheen on top, deeper, darker highlights beneath. Her skin was smooth and white, her lips full and soft. Her dress seemed unnecessarily tight at waist and bodice, plainly outlining her rather startling figure.

She asked, "You're new in town, aren't you?"

He nodded and she said, "I'm Lily Kibben."

"Matt Hurst." The way he said it, the name was a curse. Lily's eyes widened, and her smile faded.

She murmured, "I see," and stepped quickly past.

He turned and watched her back as she descended the stairs, smiling wryly at her reaction to his name. The wolf whelp was home. That was what all the town would be saying. The wolf whelp is home and there's going to be trouble.

All right, damn it! Trouble hadn't been all that was in his mind when he started back. But if they wanted trouble, then let them have it.

He found his room and opened the door. He strode to the window and looked down into the gloomy street. He saw Rudy Littlefield come out of the Bullshead saloon across the street and hurry back toward the hotel. He saw Alfred Polk and Dell Tillman come through the heavy winter doors and follow Rudy. Matt moved close to the glass and stared insolently down at them. Rudy glanced up as he approached the hotel, saw Matt and dropped his glance hastily. Tillman followed the direction of Rudy's glance with his own and scowled when he saw Matt in the window.

Matt grinned. He shucked out of the sheepskin and eased the .45 out of its holster. He spun the cylinder and checked the loads. When he replaced it, he seated it lightly. Maybe they figured on exterminating the Hurst clan once and for all, and he didn't intend to be caught unawares.

He waited in the small room's center, not afraid, but feeling the same tight emptiness in his stomach that fear could engender. He was lonely, really, and angry at himself for being so. And he resented the fact that his homecoming stirred welcome in no single one of the town's inhabitants. Why? He had never done anything to deserve this. But he was Dan Hurst's son, and because he was, they hated and distrusted him.

He heard Tillman's heavy, arrogant tread on the stairs, heard Dell's tread alone. But he knew the sheriff was with Dell and remembered the light way Polk had of walking.

It was Tillman who rapped on the door, loudly, imperatively. Matt Hurst felt his anger rising.

He said shortly, "Come in," and the door banged open. Tillman stepped in first, scowling.

He was a big man, big of body, always appearing larger because of the power he wielded and of which he was so aware. He wore a neatly-trimmed beard, and his eyes above it always looked at a man as though he were one of nature's unpleasant mistakes.

He looked at Matt that way now. "Why the hell did you come back?"

MATT stared at him coolly for a moment, trying hard to hold his temper. He said at last, "Dāmn you, you're in my room. You ain't here because I asked you either, so keep a civil tongue in your head. I came back because I took a notion to, and maybe because I heard a thing or two."

Alf Polk stepped from behind Tillman, graying, ageing, but still with that indefinable quality of confidence and efficiency exuding from him. He said calmly, "Dell, quieten down a mite. Let me talk to Matt."

Dell glared at the sheriff. Alf muttered, "Matt, Dan and your brothers were killed by a posse acting on my orders. They were caught over in Trout Creek Pass with a herd of DT stock."

"How'd they die?" He thought Dell Tillman's eyes flickered as he asked. And Alf Polk looked at the floor a moment before he answered. Finally he said with a sigh. "I guess you'll find out anyway. Dan and Frankie were shot. Will was hanged."

Matt felt a surge of passion. "That was on your orders too, I suppose."

"No." Alf seemed a little tired suddenly. "No, you know better than that, Matt. I wouldn't order such a thing."

All at once Matt knew that if they didn't get out, and quick, he wasn't going to be responsible. A lifetime of hatred and resentment seemed to boil abruptly to the surface. He said, his voice even and low-pitched, "Get out of here! Both of you! Get out while you can!"

Tillman opened his mouth to bluster, but Alf caught him by the elbow and pushed him around toward the door. His softly breathed words were barely audible to Matt, "Don't be a fool, Dell. Do what he says."

When Tillman was gone, the sheriff turned in the doorway. "Why'd you come back, Matt? You've never done anything that's outside the law. You were doing all right over in Utah." His voice was calm and soothing, a little cautious too.

Matt flared, "If you don't know, I couldn't tell you. They were all I had. When I got word they had all been killed, I wanted to know how they died. I guess I knew why. But I had to know how."

"Now you know. What you figure on doin' about it?"

Matt's voice was savage, taunting, "Suppose you figure that one out, Sheriff."

Alf Polk shrugged. "Suit yourself, Matt. But be mighty careful. You know how folks react to the name Hurst around here. I'll let you alone until you step out of line. When you do, I'm coming after you."

Matt sneered, "Or send a posse out under your orders—with Dell at its head."

Alf looked at him steadily for a long moment. At last he said, "All right. Rub it in. Maybe I deserve it at that," and backed slowly from the room.

MATT HURST sat down on the edge of the bed and buried his face in his hands. He was shaking with suppressed rage.

Well, he could do the obvious, the thing everybody expected him to do. He could kill Dell Tillman. Then run—and keep on running.

He could carry it further than that. He could find the names of the men who had comprised that posse, and exact vengeance against each one of them. He shook his head. He'd never get that job done. Because Alf would pick him up long before he finished.

He could call it a bad job and get out of town.

Or he could go out to the home place and take up where Dan and his brothers had left off.

For some reason, this course appealed to him most. Let Tillman stew a while.

He got up and spilled some of the cold water in the white china pitcher into the graniteware pan. He washed his face and dampened his black, curly hair. He dried on the thin hotel towel and ran a comb through his hair. Then he headed downstairs toward the hotel dining room.

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He caught himself thinking of that girl—Lily Kibben, and wondering who she was. She must have come to town after he had left.

Morose, lonely, and very much on the defensive, he came into the dining room and halted in the doorway to eye the thin crowd. Over in the corner sat Dell Tillman and the sheriff, Alf Polk. Both of them watched him warily. Nearer to the door sat Lily Kibben, alone. She held her glance on him a moment longer than necessary, and while it was strictly neutral, Matt thought he detected a hesitant invitation in it too.

On impulse he headed for her table and paused there, looking down, frowning at his own unexpected temerity. He said, "Mind if I join you?" And cursed himself inwardly for laying himself wide open to a refusal.

For an instant he thought she would refuse, for into her expression came a definite aloofness. Then she smiled, "Of course not. Sit down."

He released a slow sigh, pulled out a chair and sat. He found himself grinning at her and said, "I shouldn't have done that."

"Why?"

"Because it would have tickled Tillman to see you refuse."

"But I didn't refuse."

"You were thinking about it though." This girl was the first one he had encountered here in Granada who looked at him as though he were a person and who seemed able to forget that his name was Hurst.

"Yes. I guess I was. But not for the reason you think. I might have refused any strange man." Her expression was calm and thoughtful, her lips relaxed and pleasant. But her eyes held the faintest shadow of bitterness.

She looked directly at him and said honestly, "Perhaps we're the same kind. You see, I am not particularly well liked in Granada either."

"Why?" He almost snapped the question.

Her face flushed faintly and she looked away. "I'm not married. I own this hotel, which is a thing no lady should own, and worse, I run it myself. They place me just a little above the dancehall girls." She smiled ruefully. "So you see, I can understand your feelings."

Susan Davenport, who had been the hotel's waitress as long as Matt could remember, came up behind her and looked at Matt. "What're you goin' to have, Matt?" Her stance was hostile, her eyes cold.

Matt said, "Sauerkraut on the menu, ain't it?"

"All right." She went away, her back stiff and straight, with uncompromising disapproval.

Matt grinned for the second time at Lily. "I'm going to have to get used to that."

She looked at him seriously. "Why did you come back? What can you possibly hope to gain?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I'll be damned if I do."

He noticed her staring at something over his shoulder, and turned his head. Another girl had come into the dining room, and was striding toward Tillman's table. Lily whispered, "You should remember her. That's Elaine Tillman."

Matt stared, thinking, *Five years makes a lot of difference.* As indeed it did. When Matt had left, Elaine had been a lanky kid in pigtails. There was nothing lanky about her now. Nothing lanky and nothing childish. She pulled out a chair at Tillman's table and sat down. Tillman spoke to her and she turned her head to stare at Matt.

Matt could recall a time when he had been friendly with Elaine, even could remember having a crush on her. But her cool glance revealed nothing of that, for it held only the hostility he was growing so used to.

Yet for some reason, Elaine's hostility angered him inordinately. He stared back at her, deliberately insolent until she flushed

and looked away. Tillman half rose from his chair, growling something angrily, but Alf Polk pulled him down again.

And Matt Hurst laughed aloud, mockingly, bitterly.

Lily finished her coffee and stood up, suddenly cool. "I guess I was mistaken about you."

"Why?"

"I thought you might be above that, but it appears that I was wrong." She walked across the room and entered the kitchen.

Susan Davenport brought his dinner, looking oddly relieved. She was an old maid, fiftyish probably and as skinny as an old cow in the spring. She said, "You stay away from Lily, Matt Hurst."

Matt grunted, "She's twenty-one, ain't she?"

Susan slammed his water glass down so hard that water slopped on the table. "You stay away from her. Hear?"

Matt said, "Maybe. Maybe not." He looked across at Tillman, at the sheriff, at Elaine Tillman. He looked up at Susan and thought, *Keep baiting me, all of you. Keep at it. Maybe if you do you can make me blow up. Then you'll have an excuse to do what you've been wanting to do.*

Susan paled under the concentrated virulence of his glance. She backed away, turned and fled toward the kitchen.

Matt ate hurriedly, hungrily. When he was finished he tossed a dollar onto the table and got to his feet.

HE WANTED a drink. He wanted a fight. He wanted something that would work this enraged helplessness out of him. But he thought, *You'd better get out of town before you do something crazy.*

He stalked out through the lobby and onto the boardwalk before the hotel. The wind whipped his clothes, penetrating with a cold chill. Snow stung his exposed flesh, and he narrowed his eyes against it. "Tomorrow," he muttered. "Tomorrow I'll ride out home."

Abruptly he crossed the street toward the Bullshead. He banged through the doors and stalked to the bar.

Tillman must have paid his crew today, he thought. There were a full half dozen of them here, drinking at the bar with big, blond Olaf Skjerik, the foreman.

Olaf swung to face Matt, his hand hovering close to his gun. He said harshly, "What the hell did you come back for? You got any ideas of squarin' up for Dan an' his thievin' litter? If you have, go right ahead. I'm ready."

He stood cool and still, his back to the bar. Matt felt his own hand tense, felt the fingers form a claw a scant two inches above his gun grips. He looked at Olaf, at the five DT punchers he'd have to fight too. He won the battle with himself and said mildly, "With five men backing you, I guess you are ready, Olaf. It takes considerable courage for six men to brace one, don't it?"

Arms swinging at his side, he walked over to the bar. He laid a silver dollar down, having first carefully fished it out of his vest pocket. Not looking at Olaf, he took the bottle from the bartender and poured his glass full. He tossed it down and another after it.

Liquor always made him reckless, and he knew this was no time for recklessness. Yet he couldn't seem to control the compulsions that drove him.

Olaf and the DT crew watched him and conversed in low tones. Matt had just finished his fourth drink when Dell Tillman banged in, bringing a gust of icy wind and a cloud of swirling snow with him.

He stood at the door with the collar of his mackinaw turned up about his ears and said harshly, "Olaf, I want to talk to you."

"Sure, boss. Sure." Olaf crossed the room. Matt turned his back. Tingles of uneasiness ran its length as he listened to the low, indistinguishable murmur of their voices. It took no particular astuteness to guess that they were discussing him.

Abruptly, he whirled and walked toward the door. Some perverse obstinacy prevented him from sidling around Tillman's bulky figure, and he jostled the DT owner deliberately.

TILLMAN showed remarkable restraint, moving aside with only a muttered curse. But Olaf's hand snaked after his gun, coming away only at Tillman's curt, "Olaf! No!"

Matt felt a growing tension within himself. He knew the smart thing would be to get out of town before touchy tempers exploded into violence.

And he might have done this. But standing on the walk before the Bullshead was Elaine Tillman, waiting in shivering silence for her father to re-appear.

Matt scowled at her. She said, "Matt, why did you have to come back? Couldn't you let well enough alone?" Even with her nose and cheeks red from the cold, she was beautiful. Her eyes were large, deep brown in color. Her hair was jet black, lying in windblown tendrils about her face where it had escaped from the shawl tied under her small chin.

Matt growled, "You defend shooting Dan and Frankie down? You defend hanging Will?"

"They were rustling, Matt. They were caught with the goods."

"There are courts in Granada County. So far as I know, the penalty for rustling isn't death. It's two years in the state pen."

She shrugged helplessly. "So dad and Olaf were wrong. Are you going to right that wrong with more killing?"

It was Matt's turn to shrug. He was watching a strange, glowing fire in her eyes. He was watching her mouth turn soft and slack with the thoughts filling her lovely head.

She stepped close to him, and looked up with provocation that may have been entirely unintentional. "Matt, I'm thinking of you."

His mouth twisted. "Sure. Sure you are. I could tell that back in the hotel dining room."

"You're bitter, Matt. Too bitter. You can't spend your life collecting for every wrong that's ever done you."

She swayed against him. And Matt did what any man would do. His arms went around her with the latent hunger of a man who has known few women, who is suddenly offered something by a woman's eyes.

And perversely, she regretted the offering instantly as his hands touched her. She struggled.

The saloon door banged open behind Matt. He felt the tug at his belt as his gun was lifted from its holster. And he felt the savage, terrible force of a knee in the small of his back.

He released Elaine and tried to turn. Men were piling out of the Bullshead, but it was Dell who held him. It was Dell who held him with knee at his back and powerful hands on his shoulders while Olaf smashed a giant, hard fist into his unprotected face.

Numb with shock, Matt nevertheless exploded into furious action. He twisted against Dell's grip and the knee slid away. His fist crashed into Dell's face with a chunking noise that left Dell's nose a flattened, bloody mess. Dell turned him loose.

Matt's own straining against the suddenly releasing grip threw him away, threw him across the walk and into the street.

Olaf and his five came lunging after him like a pack of wolves at a fresh kill. And Matt, crouched there in the street, fought desperately and hopelessly for his life.

CHAPTER TWO

Brand Him Renegade!

AS MATT came to his feet from that first fall in the street, three simultaneous blows thudded into his body. And all of the hatred he felt for this town and its

people came boiling to the surface of his brain. His face was twisted, savage, utterly naked in its unmasked passions.

Hatred blazed from his slitted eyes. The wind beat against him, whipped his clothing against his body. He lunged, and an outstretched foot tripped him up. Before he could rise, a kick landed in his ribs, another on the side of his head. Two of the men piled down atop of him and held him pinned to the frozen ground while they beat at him with their fists.

Dimly he heard Tillman's hoarsely shouted order, "Let him up! You can hurt him more that way!"

The two that held him down rolled aside. As Matt stumbled to his knees, he drove himself forward, elbowing one of them in the groin. Matt kicked him viciously as he stepped away.

And they were on him again. Elbows, knees, fists banged into him. A man behind him kicked him in the ankle, and it gave way temporarily. Matt lunged against another of the men, cluching at him for support. And drove his head upward against the man's chin.

It snapped the man's mouth shut and he almost bit his tongue in two. Matt felt the ankle supporting his weight again and shoved the man away from him. He threw a looping left as he did so and felt a wild satisfaction at the solid way it landed.

He heard Tillman's shouting, "Get him! Get him!" and he thought he heard Elaine's sharp cry.

A hard shoulder drove upward against his jaw, snapping his head back with an audible crack. The landscape and the men closing in whirled before his vision for an instant.

He saw Elaine, wide-eyed with a sort of fascinated horror. There was something primitive in her parted lips, in her hastened breathing, in the hot lights that played in her eyes. But there was no pity in her.

Olaf Skjerik slammed against him then and drove him back against a building wall. Matt twisted, slamming both fists down against the back of Olaf's bowed neck. The man fell like a stunned steer.

He had cut the odds to three to one, and there was solid satisfaction in that. One whom he had downed lay rolling in the frozen street, groaning with pain. Another sat on the edge of the walk, head down, spitting blood between his knees and gagging. Olaf lay utterly still.

Matt stepped away from him, nimbly avoiding a rush by two of those remaining. But the third drew his gun and brought it slashing at Matt in a wide, wild swing. The barrel tip grazed his forehead and a flood of gushing blood blinded him. He swiped at his eyes with the back of a numbed hand.

A fist smashed his lips against his teeth. Another rocked his head and blurred his reason. And the gunbarrel got him a second time, driving him down into a bottomless pit of darkness.

But not stealing all consciousness or all feeling. Helpless, motionless, he lay on his back in the street while they kicked and beat at him with frustrated and senseless rage.

Until Alf Polk came running across from the hotel, shouting, "Get away from him! All of you!"

It was blessed relief when the hard, raining kicks stopped landing. It was blessed relief to sink away into that bottomless pit where there was no pain but where everlasting hostility hovered in the air like a curse.

HE WAS no longer in the street, when his consciousness came back. There was warmth around him, softness under him. His hand moved and felt the rough warmth of a woolen blanket. He opened his eyes and stared upward at the cracked ceiling of his room in the hotel.

He lifted the hand and felt his throbbing face, touching the bandages there. He groaned. Then he saw Alf Polk.

Polk said softly, "Coming out of it, Matt?"

Matt rolled onto his side and groaned again in protest at the pain that shot through his bruised and battered body. It was an effort, but he brought an elbow under him and raised his head and upper body.

His vision cleared and he had the oddest impression of Polk. He thought there was actual pain in the man's face, haunted shame in his eyes. But then it was gone and the sheriff was smiling wryly.

Polk said, "Boy, will you believe me now? Will you go on back to Utah and forget this town?"

Matt shook his head. He flung the blankets back and sat on the edge of the bed, his bare feet resting on the rough board floor. He dropped his head into his hands to ease its throbbing.

In that position he said sourly, "No," and looked up. "What kind of a man are you, Alf? What hold has Tillman got over you? You let him shoot down Dan and Frankie. Maybe that couldn't be helped. But hanging Will was plain murder and there are laws against murder in every territory in the West. You're sworn to uphold the law. Why the hell don't you do it?"

Polk was silent and his eyes avoided Matt's. Matt said, "Suppose I was to swear out an assault warrant against Tillman and his crew? Would you serve it?"

Alf got up and walked to the window. He stared down into the street for a long while before he answered. At last he grunted, "Sure, kid. I'll serve it. But don't be a fool. Tillman would have his bunch out in a couple of hours. And you'd only make a laughing-stock of yourself."

"Suppose I'd swear out a murder warrant? Would you serve that?"

"I'd have to. But how long do you think you'd last if I did? You'd be the only complaining witness. How long do you think Tillman would let you live?"

"But if he didn't get me?"

Alf sighed. "Tillman would be tried. There'd be no witnesses to appear against him. The men that were along with that posse would deny it. And Matt, hard as it is to accept, there's a lot of sympathy in any cattle country for a man who catches his own rustlers."

Matt gave him a long, level stare. "Get out of here, Alf. Get out."

POLK walked to the door. His face showed no resentment, but only ill-concealed regret. "All right, kid. I'll go. But I hoped I could talk some sense into you. I hoped you'd see the way the cards are stacked. What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going home. I'd going back out to the old place and live. I'm going to gather up what cattle still carry the Rocking H brand, and pick up where old Dan left off."

"Rustling?"

Matt looked at him pityingly. "Why did I leave this country, Alf?"

"All right. You left because you wouldn't go along with Dan's rustling. But can you ever convince Tillman that you aren't sore enough to misbrand every one of his calves you find? Can you ever convince the people around here that you aren't just like Dan,"

"Tillman will never catch me red-handed. He can't if I let his stock alone."

Alf looked at him a moment more. He said, "You're a fool, Matt. You just haven't growed up yet." He shrugged as he turned away. "Go ahead, Matt. Play out your hand even when you know the deck is stacked. Only don't come crying to me after you've lost your chips." He closed the door behind him.

Matt tried to control the rage that flooded his face with blood. His head pounded. He got up, crossed the room and peered at himself in the cracked mirror. A bandage was wound around his forehead, another covered a torn ear. Otherwise his cuts had been covered with patches of court plaster.

He was aware of stiffness around his middle, and feeling, discovered a thick

tight bandage around his ribs. He wondered how many of them were broken and suddenly understood the sharp pains he'd had whenever he breathed deeply.

He sat back down on the bed, fished makings out of his sheepskin that lay on the floor by the bed and rolled himself a smoke. He touched a match to its end and inhaled deeply.

All right, he thought, *face it. The world is full of injustice and you've come smack dab up against it. What are you going to do, beat your brains out trying to fight it? Or are you going to act grown up for a change? Act grown up and take the world the way it is instead of trying to change it?*

A man can talk sense to himself but it doesn't always help. Matt's mind was made up as he stood up again and began to pull on his clothes. Gray light filtering into the room told him that dusk was very near.

A knocking at the door startled him, and he looked anxiously for his gun. He found it on the oaken commode and picked it up. It struck him then that the knocking had not sounded like a man's knock would.

Grinning a little sheepishly he laid the gun back down and called, "Come in."

The door opened and Lily Kibben stepped into the room. Immediately her face clouded with concern. "You shouldn't be up. You have broken ribs and a concussion." She smiled faintly, "Also you have multiple lacerations, as the doctor put it."

Matt grinned at her. "In everyday language, a sore head."

"Yes." She looked at him with frank interest, a frown of puzzlement clouding her brow. "Why did you come back? Surely you must have known it would be like this."

"I guess I did. Let's just say I'm mule-headed. Stubborn."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Go out to the home place. Work."

"And try to prove that your father and brothers weren't guilty?"

He shook his head. "No. They were guilty all right. They'd been rustling Tillman's stock for years. I knew it and everybody else knew it too. I left in the first place because I wouldn't go along with it."

"What do you hope to prove, then?"

He said soberly. "Look. If they'd let me alone today, maybe I'd have turned around and left. It wasn't right that Dan and Frankie were shot, and it certainly wasn't right that Will was hanged. But a man can accept some things, even if they aren't right. Cattle thieves have been hanged before in cattle country.

"But they couldn't let me alone. And as soon as they started pushing, I knew I couldn't leave. Do you see that?"

She said quietly, "Maybe I do see." She studied him for a moment, then said, "I was watching you across the street when the fight started. I saw you try to kiss Elaine Tillman."

Matt flushed. He started to speak and stopped, wondering why it seemed so important that he explain that.

Lily murmured, "Why did you do that? Are you in love with her?"

He shook his head positively.

"Was it worth what it cost?"

Matt felt his anger stir. He said, "If you were watching, then you know she brought it on. As soon as I touched her, she changed her mind."

Lily crossed the room and stood facing him. She asked again, "Why did you do it?" She watched him, her eyes searching beneath the surface expression of his face.

HE FROWNED. "I don't like to admit this. I thought it was only because she was a woman asking to be kissed, and because I was a man hungry for a woman's kiss. But there was more to it than that. I wanted to show her—and show the town—that Hurst was as good a name as Tillman."

Lily smiled. She lifted her face and said, "I think I'd like it if you kissed me."

Matt's arms went out and pulled her against him. Her body was warm and soft. Her lips were loose with expectancy, her eyes bright. Matt kissed her.

At first there was only laxness in the girl, limp surrender. He tightened his arms about her, bore down brutally against her lips.

Suddenly her arms went up around his neck. Her body pressed hungrily against him. Her lips moved beneath his. And when she drew away, she was breathing hard. She murmured almost soundlessly, "I think if I were Elaine I would regret my struggles."

Matt grinned shakily. "Thanks." He kept his eyes steadily on her, feeling the rise within himself of a hunger that dwarfed any he had ever experienced before.

Lily lowered her glance and backed away. "You must be starved. I'll send you up some food." She turned and walked swiftly through the door.

Matt sat down and pulled on his boots. Oddly, for the first time since his return, he felt proud of himself. He felt as though he were nine feet tall, as though Tillman and the sheriff were his acorn.

He heard the harsh clicking steps of Susan Davenport in the hall, and looked up as she came in with a steaming tray.

She set it down on the table. "Hmpff. Room service now, is it? What did you do to that girl?"

Matt grinned at her mockingly, "She's twenty-one, ain't she?"

"Some ways. Others, she ain't. You hurt her, Matt Hurst, and I'll—"

"You'll what?"

She faced him defiantly, "I'll kill you myself."

Matt said, "I won't hurt her. Not if I can help it."

Susan flounced out of the room. Matt pulled up a chair and began to eat. He could hear the wind howling outside and he thought of the twenty miles out to

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Rocking H with dismal dislike. But he knew that if he didn't go out tonight he'd never go.

So he finished his dinner quickly, gulped the scalding coffee and slipped into his sheepskin. Then he tramped downstairs and picking up his saddle and carpetbag went out into the biting wind.

HE GASPED as the full fury of the sub-zero blast struck him. And winced at the subsequent pain in his ribs. Bending forward against the force of it, he slogged up-street to the north until he came to the stable.

Behind him the town seemed almost deserted. Here and there an oil lamp flickered wanly in some window, but the streets were empty, and the horses of Tillman's crew were no longer racked before the Bullshead.

Inside the stable, he dumped his saddle and bag beside the door and went into the tiny tackroom that served also as an office for old Si VanNess. Si sat with his feet against the pot-bellied stove, and he looked up inquiringly as Matt came in, not recognizing him at first. "Not figgerin' to ride in this, are you, stranger?"

Matt nodded. He fished a bandanna from his pocket, took off his hat and tied the bandanna over his ears. Si recognized him and slammed his feet down onto the floor. "Matt Hurst!"

"Yeah. Matt Hurst."

"Goin' home?" There was thinly veiled hostility in Si's voice.

Matt nodded. "I want a horse."

"Dunno. Dunno about that."

"You'd better find out fast. I'll rent him or buy him, but I want a horse."

"Reckon you better buy."

Matt shrugged resignedly. "All right. But no Hurst ever stole a horse and you damn well know it."

"No offense, Matt. No offense." But the wizened old man didn't back down on his demand that Matt buy the horse.

He shuffled into the cold, gloomy rear of the stable and returned shortly leading a big blue roan gelding. Matt carried a lantern out and set it on the floor while he went over the horse. He would not have put it past Si to palm off a string-halted or smooth-mouthed horse on him. The horse was sound, however, and young, so he paid the seventy dollars Si demanded without comment.

Town fell behind, and Matt headed directly north along the road. After the first five miles, his feet were numb. He got off and walked a while.

Snow fell thicker now, and began to pile up on the ground.

A sense of hopelessness and depression increased in Matt's consciousness.

Why am I doing this? he asked himself. It was now obvious that vengeance for the death of his father and brothers was out of the question. It was also obvious that years would be consumed in living down the bad name Hursts had always had hereabouts.

Yet hard as it was, Matt knew it was a thing he had to do if he wanted to live at peace with his own conscience.

Midnight passed. Matt walked enough to keep the circulation up in his legs and feet.

He almost missed the turn that led to the Hurst ranch, but he realized it and retraced his steps. After a few moments, dismounting to walk, he saw the dim hoofprints of horses in the road before him, almost drifted over by driving snow.

Instantly he swung into the saddle, spurred to a reckless gallop. What were they up to now?

He knew, really, even before he saw the glow in the sky. He knew and rode recklessly, his face twisted into a savage, bitter pattern. They had burned him out!

As he rode up before the smoldering ruins, he was shouting at the top of his lungs—shouting curses, blasphemies—shouting threats, and almost sobbing, with hurt and cold and awful frustration.

Chilled and shaking, he piled off the horse and warmed himself in the charred and glowing embers of the house. He looked around at the firelit yard. They had burned the barn as well as the house. But the corral stood intact. And dug into a bluff a hundred yards from the house was the spud cellar, something they couldn't burn.

This was the place Matt Hurst remembered from the time he began remembering. It was where he had been born. The buildings stood in the center of a 160-acre homestead claim. And surrounding that, was Rocking H range.

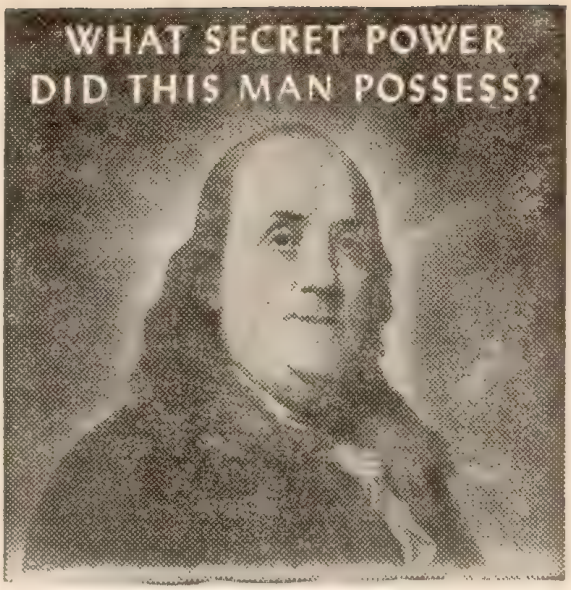
Slumped and sombre, he stood and stared at what was left. He was beaten. Even Matt could see that now, and admit it because he had to. It was ride back to town, sell his horse and get on the train for Utah. A man could stand only so much and Matt had stood it.

Something twitched at his hat, snatched it from his head. The report came instantly, a deep booming report like that of a rifle. Matt hit the ground before its roar had quite died away, lying silent and still.

So he was not even to have his chance to run? Well to hell with them! He'd not run and he'd not quit. He'd stay and if death were his due for that, then it couldn't be helped. He'd take a few of them with him.

He made his breathing shallow and waited. After a few moments he heard a soft shuffling in the snow. It came nearer —and then a rifle muzzle dug savagely into his back. He heard a man's hoarse breathing.

Matt suddenly threw himself backward against the rifle muzzle with all the violence he could muster, rolling as he did. He came up grasping the icy gun muzzle in one hand. He pulled and the rifle bearer tumbled toward him with a sharp cry. Matt raised his knees and they caught the man in the stomach.



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But with the breath that drove so savagely from him the man brought the words, "Matt! Don't!"

Matt sat up, peering down at the man's shaggy face. "Kip! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Waitin' fer you to come home." Kip struggled to his feet.

"Where were you? I didn't see anyone."

"Sure not. I was in the spud cellar." Kip's voice was cracked and reedy. "Come on. I got a fire goin' in there an' it's a sight warmer than it is out here. I got coffee an' whisky too."

MATT followed him silently across the yard. A lamp was burning in the spud cellar, lighting its moldy walls and dirt floor. There was a moldy, damp smell in the air, but Kip had raked out the disintegrating sacks of rotting potatoes and the floor was as clean as it would ever be.

Kip had made a bunk out of one of the barn doors by laying it on the floor and spreading his blankets over it.

He poured out a cup of coffee, laced it stiffly with whiskey and handed it to Matt. "You look like you could use this."

Matt asked, after the first scalding sip, "Did you see them do this, Kip?"

"I did. Skjerik ramrodded this dirty job. He had three men with him.

"Tillman along?"

Kip shook his head.

"When did they do it?"

"Just after dark." The old man peered at Matt. "What hit you? A freight train?"

Matt made a twisted grin. "Same freight train that burned this place, Kip. Only it was Skjerik and six men."

"What you goin' to do about it?"

Matt shrugged. "I don't know. This is rough on me, but it wasn't for me that I came back. I came back to see if Dan and Frankie and Will got a fair shake. They didn't, but they knew the chances they ran taking Tillman's stock. They got what they knew they would if he caught them."

"You mean to say you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"That they'd quit rustling Tillman's stock. They quit when you pulled out. Dan hadn't changed a brand for damn nigh four years. He wrote a couple of hundred letters to different parts of the country tryin' to find you an' get you to come back. I guess he realized you was right."

Matt stared at him, his mouth hanging open. "Kip, you're crazy. Why else would Tillman go after them?"

"He needed Hurst grass. About a year ago he bought the Holt place that borders you on the west. After that, this place cut him plumb in two. He tried to buy it from Dan half a dozen times, only Dan figured maybe you'd want it some day."

A crazy, tight, nervous fury was growing in Matt. He said, "But Alf said—"

"Alf," Kip snorted. "He's been courtin' that daughter of Tillman's. He'd perjure himself to St. Peter to get her."

"He's twenty years older than her." Matt was incredulous.

"Sure. Them kind want even harder than a young buck. They want so hard nothin' else matters to 'em."

"But how the hell did Tillman get away with it? There's other people in the country. Surely someone knew—"

"They knew Dan and your brothers were suspected of rustlin'. Dan didn't go around tellin' folks he'd quit. Hursts have had a bad name in these parts for so long, it'd take a sight more than Dan's words to whitewash it anyhow."

Matt whistled. "Kip, how can you be sure?"

"Boy, I was with 'em. 'Twas a blizzard, somethin' like the one tonight. We were movin' a bunch of Rockin' H stuff in to be fed for the winter. They jumped us in that patch of timber over by Oak Springs. We made a run fer it, scatterin' like Dan said. I was lookin' back an' seen Olaf an' Tillman ridin' together. 'Bout then a low tree limb got me on the side of the head an'

dumped me outn the saddle. When I come to, I started huntin' around fer Dan an' the boys. I found 'em. I found 'em all right. Dan an' Frankie shot. Will hanged."

"What'd you do?"

Kip looked at the floor. He cleared his throat. His voice was low and shamed. "Nothin', boy. Nothin'. I knowed the thing was so big nobody'd dare let a witness to it live. I knowed it was useless to go to Alf Polk. So I just kept my mouth shut. I knowed you'd hear about it an' come hot-footin' it home. An' I figgered I'd be a sight more use to you alive than dead."

"How's it happen they didn't look for you? Didn't they know you were working for Rocking H?"

"That's just it. I wasn't. Nobody even knowed I was in the country. I'd been in Colorado ridin' for an outfit down there durin' the summer. When they laid me off, I drifted in here to see if maybe Dan wouldn't hire me durin' the winter."

Matt realized that his fists were clenched so hard that the nails were biting into his palms. He spat his words out like bullets, "They won't get away with it. They won't get away with it."

CHAPTER THREE

Ride, Vengeance, Ride!

MATT lay awake most of the night, staring upward into the utter blackness of the cellar. Outside, the wind howled and whined and deposited a six-inch layer of snow on the ground. In the morning, Matt was no nearer a solution than he'd been before.

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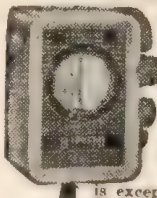

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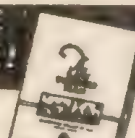

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But he remembered the look of shame in Alf Polk's eyes and his words, "All right. Rub it in. Maybe I deserve it at that."

He made up his mind and rolled out of his blankets. As he did, Kip stirred and sat up sleepily. Matt built a fire in the cast-iron stove Kip had apparently salvaged from the ranch junk heap. Kip got a quarter of venison where he had hung it outside and cut off half a dozen steaks. He mixed up some biscuits and slid them into the oven.

"Matt, you look like mebbe you've made up your mind."

Matt nodded. "I'm going to take a whirl at Alf Polk. He wasn't along on that raid when Dan and the boys were killed. Maybe he don't know it was a put up job."

"What if you're wrong?"

"I won't be any worse off than I am right now. They're doing their damndest to get me anyway."

Kip's seamed, aged face showed his disapproval. But he only grunted. He crossed the room, got his rifle and began to clean it. He said, "I'll git ready, son. They'll be after me quick as Alf kin git in touch with Tillman."

Matt said, "Kip, it's our only chance. Some of the men who were along on that deal are bound to've read the brands on that bunch of stuff. They'll know they weren't DT stock but our own. Get 'em in a jail cell, and I'll lay you ten to one they'll talk."

Kip shrugged. "Wish I had your confidence. Well, hell, I'm old anyhow. I got to go sometime and I'd ruther go with a bullet in me than lay in a bed and die slow."

Matt grinned as he mopped gravy from his plate with a broken biscuit. "Worrying is what gave you all that gray hair."

He got up and shrugged into his sheepskin. Outside, the world was dazzling with bright sunlight on fresh snow. The sky was as blue as Lily Kibben's eyes. He got his horse from the corral where he had put him last night late and saddled up, wishing the animal had had some hay last night, or at least some grain. But the haystack had caught from the barn, and even yet was smoldering, sending a column of blue smoke into the sky like a signal. All the grain had been in the barn. He made a mental note to have a load of hay and grain sent out today from town.

Kip looked up at him after he had mounted. He said, "Lessee. It'll take you 'till ten or eleven to git to town. It'll take Alf 'till two to ride out to Tillman's. So I reckon we kin expect comp'ny along about three or four. You be back by then?"

"Sure."

"Bring me back a couple boxes of forty-four-fortys. Better bring a couple boxes of forty-fives for yourself. We'll likely need 'em."

Matt snorted and rode away.

RIDING, he considered Kip's doubt, weighing it against his own confidence. All depended, he was aware, upon Alf Polk's honesty. If he were mistaken in giving Alf credit for honesty, then Kip was right. They'd fight to the death right in the spud cellar.

But if Alf were honest, he'd take a posse and go out to DT for Tillman, Olaf Skjerik, and the men who had ridden on that murderous errand.

The air warmed rapidly under the bright sun as Matt rode. Underfoot the snow turned soft, and melted away from the high spots where it was all but scoured clean.

Matt's mind was filled with memories of his father and two brothers and with regrets that none of Dan's many letters had found him. He would have liked to have made his peace with them before they died. He would have liked to unsay some of the harsh things he had said on the day he left.

He was touched by the fact that Dan and his brothers had given up their raids on

DT stock because of his leaving. And he was more than ever determined to see that their murderers came to justice.

Engrossed by his thoughts, he did not see the rider who pulled out of a side road and stopped to wait for him until he was almost upon her.

It was Elaine Tillman. Her smile was bright if a trifle uncertain.

He stared at her, unsmiling.

She faltered, "Matt, I'm so awfully sorry about yesterday. But I don't think I could have stopped them."

"You didn't even try. And you know damned well you were asking me to kiss you."

"Matt, you're wrong. I can see how you might have got that idea, but—"

Matt laughed harshly. Elaine flushed. She said defiantly, "All right. I was asking for it. But as soon as you touched me, I remembered Dad and Olaf inside the saloon. I knew they might come out at any minute. I was afraid of what they'd do if they found me in your arms. So I struggled, hoping to get loose before they came out. You mustn't blame them too much, Matt. Your father and brother stole a lot of dad's cattle. They naturally hate the name Hurst."

Matt's expression didn't change. His eyes were bullet-cold. "Did you know they burned me out last night? House, barn, haystacks. I spent the night in the spud cellar."

Elaine showed surprise that could not have been feigned. "Matt, it couldn't have been them. Dad wouldn't do such a thing."

Again Matt laughed. "They were seen. And I'll tell you something else. Dan and Frankie and Will were driving a herd of Rocking H stuff when they were killed. It was deliberate, cold-blooded murder. They hadn't stolen a DT critter for four years—not since I pulled out of the country. And Dell Tillman knew it."

Elaine's eyes blazed. "Matt Hurst, you're a liar."

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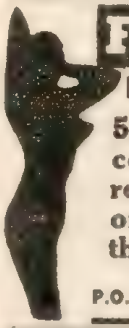

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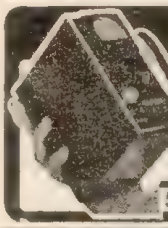

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He shook his head. "I've got proof of it."

"Proof. Proof. What proof could you have?"

He smiled coldly. "An eyewitness."

"Who?"

"Same one that saw them burn the buildings at Rocking H last night. Kip Reynolds."

She pulled up her horse and stared at him. She must have read truth and sincerity in his eyes, for she suddenly slumped in the saddle and the fight went out of her.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to see Tillman and Skjerik dangling at the end of a rope. I'm going to see every man that was with them that night rotting in the state pen. I'm going to see Alf Polk driven out of the country, disgraced because he permitted it to go unpunished. And I'm going to see the name of Hurst respected and that of Tillman dirtied the way my own name has been dirtied."

"Is that all you want, Matt?"

"Not altogether. I want the buildings at Rocking H paid for."

SUDDENLY Elaine slipped out of the saddle. She walked to the side of Matt's horse and stood looking up at him. Tears of humiliation stood out in her eyes. She fumbled in the pocket of her wolfskin coat, but Matt paid little attention to that. He thought she was searching for a handkerchief.

She said, "Matt, please. I've had no hand in all these things. Must I suffer too?" Her hand came out of her pocket and she caught at Matt's cinch as the horse sidestepped nervously away.

She was pleading, "Matt, you used to like me. And I liked you, Matt, only I was afraid of Dad."

Matt felt a moment's doubt. Then his mind pictured Will, swinging in the icy breeze because Tillman was greedy, pictured Dan and Frankie, still on the ground while snow drifted over their unfeeling faces—because Tillman was greedy.

She said quickly, "Matt, is it all dead, your feeling for me? Because if it isn't, we can still be happy." She made a shaky smile, and in her eyes was promise, invitation. "Get down, Matt. Please."

Matt's eyes searched her face. Odd, the resemblance it bore to her father's even while it was entirely different. Odd, that resemblance—the same arrogance, carefully masked, the same unbending ruthlessness. Dell would do anything to attain his ends, and Matt knew suddenly that Elaine would too.

He wanted to laugh, to mock her offer. But his innate sense of chivalry would not permit it. He said gently, "It's too late, Elaine. Too many things have happened. I couldn't let Dell get away with those three murders even if I wanted to."

Now, her carefully masked arrogance and ruthlessness showed in her face. Her expression contorted with balked, frustrated fury.

Matt's horse suddenly shied away from the girl. Matt felt his saddle turn and felt himself dumped onto the snowy ground, along with his saddle. Elaine stood ten feet away, looking at him, a cryptic smile on her face, a small pocket knife in her hand.

Matt struggled to his feet, more surprised than angered. "What the hell did you do that for?"

She laughed softly, mockingly, and her eyes held a gleam of triumph. "You're beaten, Matt Hurst. Beaten. Do you know what I'm going to do?"

He shook his head, thoroughly puzzled.

She put the knife in her pocket, and her hand came out holding a derringer, which she pointed steadily at him. "I'm going to tear my clothes and scratch my face. I'm going to ride into town and say that you attacked me." Her free hand went to her face and her nails raked deliberate gashes across her cheek. Matt tensed, started to-

ward her, but a freezing of her glance, a tightening of her hand around the grip of the gun halted him.

She said, "Matt, don't do it, or I'll kill you."

"You wouldn't get away with it." But he knew he was wrong. She would get away with it. The word of a Tillman was better than that of a Hurst any day. He stopped, holding his hands rigidly at his sides while he watched the mounting hysteria in Elaine.

She caught at the neck of her coat and ripped it open, and the buttons popped off onto the snowy ground. She caught at her bodice and ripped it downward, exposing to his startled eyes a smoothly rounded, swelling white breast.

Again Matt tensed, wanting desperately to halt this. There was something indecent about it that shocked him. Yet what could he do? Even if he escaped being shot by that steady gun in her hand, what would have been accomplished? He could not restrain her indefinitely. He could not hold her here all day.

He whispered, "Elaine, stop it. This is crazy."

"Is it? I don't think so. I think it's the only way I can beat you Matt."

Her hand went upward to her hair, deliberately began pulling the hairpins and dropping them. Her hair streamed in a cascade about her shoulders.

And Matt knew an empty, defeated feeling. She was right. He was helpless to stop her and he was beaten. He'd had Tillman right where he wanted him; he'd been able to foresee justice done for the murder of his father and brothers. Now, all hope of that was gone.

The townspeople would believe Elaine. Nothing would suit them better than to believe that this final degradation was possible to a Hurst.

Still holding the tiny gun on him, Elaine walked over and mounted her horse. She

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rode away, unspeaking but smiling triumphantly.

With violently trembling fingers, Matt got out his pocket knife and walked over to where his saddle lay. He began to mend his cinch.

HIS emotions ran the gamut, in the next few moments, from utter despair to towering rage. He cut holes in each end of the cut cinch latigo, then cut off one of his leather saddle strings and with this, laced the two ends together.

He caught his horse and slammed the saddle up with unnecessary viciousness. The horse shied and looked at him with reproachful eyes. Matt leaped into the saddle, but he did not dig in his spurs. Instead, he looked toward town, looked back toward Rocking H, and then looked in the direction of Tillman's DT.

An idea began to blossom in his head, giving hope to his reluctance to run.

When he did finally sink his spurs, his horse was headed for Tillman's place.

He was through running. If he ran now, he knew what the end would be. They'd hunt him down on Elaine Tillman's testimony until they found him. And they'd find him if it took ten years. When they did, there could be no end but the hangman's noose. Not even a trial to precede it. For only this way could the men of the frontier keep their women safe from the riff-raff that prowled its lonely reaches.

Matt's horse pounded away the few short miles that lay between the place Elaine had left him and the Tillman ranch. A little before eight he topped a rise and looked down into its yard.

He knew the next few minutes would draw heavily on his dwindling patience. So he steeled himself to wait.

Apparently breakfast had been over for some time. Yet the crew was still in the bunkhouse, receiving instructions on the day's tasks.

Matt saw Tillman come out onto the long veranda of the house, pause and light a cigar.

Hatred poured through Matt like a poison. His hands trembled and his face went white. It took all of his self control to keep his hand off the grips of his gun, even though he knew this was an impossible range for a revolver.

Tillman puffed luxuriously for a few moments, then strolled ponderously toward the bunkhouse. He met Olaf at the door, and the crew spilled out around the two as they stood talking.

There was a brief commotion in the corral as each roped out a horse for the day. Then the crew mounted, split, and in two bunches rode at a slow trot away from the ranch. Leaving Tillman and Skjerik in the bunkhouse doorway.

The sound of their talk carried clearly in the crisp air if the words did not. Matt began to curse softly, virulently under his breath.

"Separate, damn you. Separate. I can't jump you both and I've got to have Tillman."

As though in immediate recognition of his command, Olaf slouched away toward the corral. And moments later rode out on the trail of one of the crews.

Matt did not move. Tillman watched Olaf until he was out of sight. Then he turned and made his way toward the house.

Matt wasted no time at all now. At a run, he caught his horse and swung himself to the saddle. He urged the horse into a swift, relatively silent running walk and headed off the rise toward the ranchyard, hoping that Tillman would not pause at the window and look out.

He reached the yard without incident. Still it was touchy, for one of the crew might return after something forgotten in the morning's haste.

He tied his horse to the porch rail and walking soundlessly, mounted the steps. Since the morning was fairly warm, Till-

man had left the door ajar. Matt took an instant to draw his gun and thumb back the hammer and then he stepped into the house.

The huge front room was empty. Matt tried to recall from the couple of times he had been in this house, where the office was exactly. He decided it was off the oak-paneled dining-room.

He saw that he had been right an instant before he stepped into the office doorway, the gun steady in his hand.

Dell Tillman looked up with surprised annoyance that changed in a miraculously short instant to pure undistilled rage. He said, "Get out of here."

Matt's lips curled unpleasantly. "Not until you come with me."

"Are you crazy? Have you gone plumb nuts?" His hand yanked open one of the desk drawers before him and dived inside.

But Matt was quicker. With two swift strides he reached the desk and leaning over it, slashed savagely at Tillman's face. The gun barrel caught Tillman's nose, broke the cartilage in it and shoved it to one side, bleeding internally and purpling outside.

Tillman forgot the gun in the drawer. He clapped a hand to his nose, and tears of pain stood out in his eyes and rolled across his cheeks. But he uttered no sound.

His eyes were blazing coals as they stared their defiance at Matt.

Matt said evenly, "You're coming with me."

"I'll be damned if I will."

Matt's gunbarrel slashed again. This time it caught Tillman on the side of his jaw. The sound of bone breaking was plain in the room. And this time, a howl of pain, almost a sob came from Tillman's tight-held lips.

His other hand went up and shoved his sagging jaw back into place. Pain whitened his face and brought beads of sweat out on his broad forehead.

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Matt said evenly, hiding the sickness that seared his soul, "Get on your feet and come with me. Or do you want another taste of this?"

Tillman cringed. He got up and came around the desk, still holding his shattered jaw carefully in one hand. He said weakly, "Let me tie this up. Man, I've got to have a doctor."

"Later." Matt laughed sourly. "I want it to hurt you 'till we get where we're going. I want it to hurt you bad. Maybe if it hurts you enough you'll want to talk. Maybe you'll want to tell me everything you know without making me hit you again."

He herded Tillman ahead of him out the door. Tillman winced as the cold air touched the exposed roots of his broken teeth. Matt crossed the yard, and watching Tillman out of the corner of his eyes, roped a horse out of the corral. He pulled a saddle from the top rail and cinched it down on the horse's back. He walked across the yard, mounted and returned.

"Get up," he said curtly. "And don't forget. There's nothing but death in this for me if I get caught. If we run into someone, I'm going to kill you first. With a shot right in the belly where it'll hurt before it kills you."

Tillman mounted painfully. And Matt headed out at a trot.

A trot is the most painful gait imaginable for a man in pain anyway. With Tillman's broken and sagging jaw, it was torture.

Whenever Tillman would pale and sway in the saddle, Matt would slow to a walk. And when Tillman would apparently recover, he'd again urge the horses into that bone-jolting trot.

Twice, Tillman tried to speak, but Matt only said brutally, "Shut up!"

JUST before noon, they reached the dug-out spud cellar on Rocking H.

Kip came out of the cellar door and stood, rifle in hand, watching. Matt said harshly to Tillman, "Get down!"

Tillman slid off his horse, nearly collapsing as his feet touched the ground. Matt dropped his horse's reins. He shoved Tillman ahead of him to the dug-out door.

Kip's eyes widened, "What'd you do to him?"

"It's a long story that I'll tell you later. Something came up that made me change my plans this morning. Go look in my bag. You'll find a paper and pencil. Bring it out. I want to write down what Tillman's got to say."

Tillman showed no resistance, indicated no will to refuse.

Kip came back with a pad and pencil and Matt sat down with his back to the door. On the top of the sheet he wrote, STATEMENT, and the date, JANUARY 27, 1887.

He looked up at Tillman. "Make it easy on yourself. What happened the day you jumped Dan and my two brothers."

Tillman hesitated. Matt said, "Kip, hit him in the jaw with your fist."

Kip started toward Tillman. But Tillman said, "No. I'll tell you."

"Go ahead." Matt poised the pencil, and began to write swiftly as Tillman talked.

"I rode in that morning and told Alf that Dan was moving a herd of DT stock. Alf deputized me and Olaf, and we took Sam Willis, Joe Furness, and Utah Dunning."

"Five of you then?"

Tillman nodded. "We caught them over by Oak Springs."

"Did they have any DT stock?"

Tillman shook his head after a wary glance at Kip. "Only Rocking H stuff. We jumped them and shot two of them down. We caught Will and strung him up."

"Did your crew get a look at the cattle?"

Tillman shook his head. "It was snowing. Nobody was payin' any attention to the cattle, and they scattered anyhow. But Joe Furness' horse was shot out from under him and while he was lying there a little bunch of the cattle went past him. He asked Olaf about it later. Olaf told him

he'd kill him if he opened his mouth about it."

Matt began to grin. He looked up at Kip. "We've got two eye-witnesses then."

Tillman looked surprised. Matt said, "There was a fourth man along with them that day. Kip here. He'd just drifted in from Colorado and Dan agreed to give him his keep for his winter's work."

He got up and handed the pad to Tillman. "Sign it."

Tillman did. Matt folded up the paper and handed it to Kip. "Keep this. When the sheriff arrives, pay no mind to what he's got to say about me. But make him read this."

Kip grinned. "All right."

But Matt did not return his grin. He said soberly, "You haven't heard the worst of it yet. I'm supposed to have attacked Elaine Tillman. If I can talk my way out of that one, I'll be better than I think I am."

Tillman's face grew slowly purple. Matt said, "Do you know what your daughter did? She cut my cinch this morning so I couldn't beat her to town. She clawed her own face and half tore her clothes off. Then she took out for town."

Tillman lunged at him. "Liar!"

Kip tripped the man. But his eyes were cold as he looked at Matt. "I hope he's wrong, Matt. I got no use for a man that'll force a woman."

Matt grinned sourly, "Even you, huh Kip?" He mounted and rode away fuming.

HALFWAY to town, Matt topped a low rise of ground over which the road ran and saw the sheriff's posse sweeping toward him. He was about to leave the road and seek concealment when the sheriff led his men off the road, taking the more direct route across country toward Rocking H.

Matt, mostly concealed by the rise, sat

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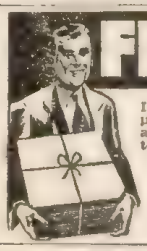

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looking ruefully after them. A man wouldn't have a chance with a bunch like that. He wouldn't even get back to town. They'd hunt around until they found a cottonwood limb strong enough to hold him and then they'd hang him.

Shrugging, he lifted the blue roan to a mile-eating, rolling lope, and stayed with the gait steadily all the way to the outskirts of Granada. There, he left the horse in an abandoned, sagging building and proceeded on foot.

He walked openly down the street toward the center of town, nervous and very much alert, ready at an instant's notice to snake his gun from its holster and start blasting away. He didn't intend to be taken alive, to be hanged for a crime of which he was wholly innocent.

The very unexpectedness of his presence here must have carried him through, for he reached the alley behind the hotel without incident, save for a searching stare given him by an oldster who came out of the Chinese restaurant next door to dump a pan of dishwater.

HE WENT on past the hotel, waiting until this oldster should go back inside the restaurant. When he did, Matt whirled and ran back to the rear door of the hotel. He entered, closed the door behind him and stood back to the wall, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to this dimness after the sun-glare on new snow outside.

He stood in a storeroom, piled high with canned goods, barrels of sugar, molasses and crackers.

There were two doors leading out. One, Matt surmised, led to the kitchen, and he guessed that the one which showed the most wear was probably the kitchen door. He crossed the room and opened the other one.

Cautiously he peered through. He was looking into a long hallway, which ended in the lobby thirty feet away.

He slipped through the door and closed it behind him. He advanced along the hallway until he could look into the lobby. Now, he realized, he needed some luck. Somehow, he had to find Lily Kibben without being seen himself.

The lobby was deserted, save for the clerk poring over a ledger at the desk. It was mid-afternoon, and Matt knew the dining room would also be deserted. The chances were good that Lily was in her room on the second floor.

He made the stairway without being seen and crept silently upward. He reached the top and paused, trying to remember the direction Lily had been coming from when he'd met her here that first day.

He had a vague memory of her coming from around to the left of the stairway—and there were only two rooms there.

He knocked softly on the first one, numbered *203*. He got no answer, so he moved on to the second, *205*. He heard steps inside the room, and grew tense as he waited.

When Lily opened the door, he released a long sigh of relief.

HER face, when she saw him, seemed to smooth out into cautious neutrality. "What are you doing here? Don't you know how dangerous it—"

"I know." He shoved past her and closed the door. "First of all, do you believe I attacked Elaine?" he asked levelly.

"Did you?"

"No. I didn't."

"Then who did?" Her eyes withheld judgment.

"Nobody." He crossed the room and sat down tiredly on the bed. He looked around him. Lily's room was a feminine room, from frilly lace curtains at the window to the satin spread on which he sat. A feminine room that had a light fragrance of woman and woman's perfume.

"I don't understand."

"I met her on the road this morning. I told her I had proof that my father and brothers had been driving their own stock

the day they were jumped by Tillman. I told her I was going to the sheriff with the proof."

"What was the proof?"

"An eyewitness Tillman didn't know existed. An old-timer that's been around Rocking H off and on for years. He told me Dan hadn't mis-branded a steer since I left four years ago. He told me Tillman wanted Rocking H and that was why he rigged up that rustling scheme."

"Then what happened?"

"When Elaine became convinced that I was telling the truth, she started to plead with me." Matt felt a flush stealing into his face. He said, "She came over to my horse and grabbed hold of the cinch. First thing I knew, I was on the ground, and my saddle was too. She'd cut the latigo. She pulled a gun on me, said she'd shoot if I tried to stop her. She clawed her face, ripped her clothes and took down her hair. She told me I'd best get out of the country because she was going into Granada and tell that I'd attacked her."

For the first time, Lily's expression showed belief. "What did you do?"

"What could I do? I could have made a try for her gun, and maybe I'd have got it. But that wouldn't have helped. I couldn't hold her there forever. I figured I was cooked. But I wasn't going to let her stunt get Tillman out of paying for killing Dan and my brothers. So I rode over to DT and kidnapped him. I beat him up some with my gun-barrel. I took him over to Rocking H and made him confess in front of Kip Reynolds."

"Matt, Matt, what are you going to do now? They'll lynch you if they can catch you."

"I know it." He got up and faced her, standing close. "I just wanted you to know the truth from me. I didn't want you thinking that what Elaine said was true."

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He found it in the shining brightness of Lily's eyes. "Thank you, Matt."

He turned toward the door. Lily asked, "What are you going to do?"

He shrugged. "Run, I guess. I don't see how I can save myself. But at least, Tillman and Olaf Skjerik will pay for what they did. I only wish there wasn't so damned much snow on the ground. I won't have much chance. . . ."

Lily interrupted excitedly, "Matt, wait. Did you struggle at all with Elaine this morning?"

"I never touched her."

"Matt, are you sure? It's important. Are you sure you never touched her?"

He nodded, puzzled. Flushed, excited, Lily began to talk. As she did, a flicker of hope began to glow in Matt's eyes. Ten minutes later, he slipped swiftly down the stairs, back to the alley by the same route he had followed coming in.

THERE was one difference in the way he walked when he came to the street. Before, he had come with his head averted, with his hat pulled low over his eyes. Now, he strode along boldly, looking each man he met straight in the eyes.

The third one recognized him. Matt saw the man's face pale, saw his mouth drop open. He went on past, and felt the man's eyes boring into his back. He waited another instant and then stole a quick look behind him. The man was running frantically along the street toward the center of town.

When he was out of effective pistol range, the man began to yell, "It's Hurst! Matt Hurst! He's right here in town, bold as brass. The damned skunk!"

Matt smiled faintly. He continued to walk unhurriedly. A rifle boomed out behind him and the bullet tore splinters from the frame building wall beside him.

Feigning surprise, Matt looked around. He could see them coming, a ragged line of them, like skirmishers in an Indian battle. As they came, order began to emerge from their confusion. Matt heard the authoritative voice of Judge Fisher, saw his tall, spare figure in the vanguard of the approaching mob.

Matt broke into a hard run.

He went around a corner, running as hard as he could. In seconds, a few of that mob would be mounted. They'd run down a man afoot in no time.

He reached his horse. He heard the howl of the mob plainly and knew they were drawing close, too close. He heard the pound of hoofbeats—

He mounted and spurred his horse savagely out the door and into the open, ducking low to avoid the door-frame. And went out of town at a hard run with his mounted pursuers only a short hundred feet behind.

For the first two miles, Matt rode as hard as he could, and barely managed to stay out of range of their booming guns. But at last, they apparently decided to wait for the remainder of the mob to catch up, and so slowed to a walk. They had seen the plain trail he made in the snow and had known he could not get away.

Matt put about a mile between himself and his pursuers, and then slowed his horse as well. The animal was breathing hard, was sweated heavily. And he was tired. Hardly in condition to serve a man who had to escape.

At a walk, then, Matt left the road and pointed the horse toward Rocking H. But as he rode, he began to doubt the wisdom of Lily's suggestion. He began to doubt, and loosened the bandanna around his throat instinctively as he thought of the rope they would put around his neck.

Clouds had drifted across the sun, black, lowering clouds that forecast another storm. Matt tipped up his face and tried to estimate how long it would hold off before it struck. Four or five hours, he hoped. Four or five hours.

Always behind him were the angry ones, the ones who wanted his blood. A couple

of miles short of Rocking H, another group pounded up to join the first. Immediately they all surged forward at a hard run.

Matt shrugged and touched the roan with his spurs. Rested a little, the animal answered with a burst of speed. And at last, Matt rode in sight of the Rocking H.

The yard was jammed with the horses of the sheriff's posse. There was a cluster of men before the dugout cellar. Matt saw Tillman sitting dejectedly on a box. A white bandage around his jaw, tied up on top of his head made him stand out plainly.

Matt galloped into the yard, yelling, "Here I am, Sheriff! Come and get me." And pounded out away from it before they recovered from their surprise enough to reach for their guns.

Immediately after leaving, Matt slowed the roan a little. He knew they'd be milling around in the yard for a while before they got organized. Grimly he realized that when they did, there would be over fifty of them on his trail.

He reached the place where the lane to DT joined the road well ahead of them. He dismounted, concealed his horse in a dry wash, and with his rifle poked up out of that same wash, settled himself to wait.

CHAPTER FOUR

Last Roundup!

LILY had barely reached the street when she heard the cry lifted, "There he goes! Get him, damn it, get him!"

Immediately, almost, from the doors along this street, men ran out, carrying rifles, revolvers, pitchforks. They formed a ragged line across the width of the street, grim-faced men who advanced toward the edge of town with purposeful determination.

There was something cold about them all that struck terror to Lily's heart. They would be merciless when they caught Matt.

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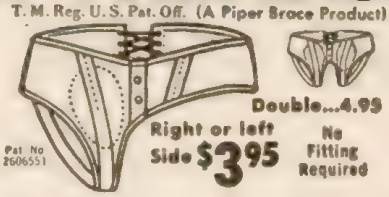

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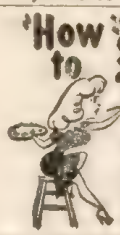

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For in the minds of all he was convicted, guilty. The word of a woman, particularly a woman such as Elaine Tillman, could not be doubted.

Judge Fisher took charge, shouting crisp, concise orders. He sent half a dozen men to the livery stable after horses. He instructed those others who had horses saddled to get them immediately and try to head Matt off.

And less than two minutes later, six horsemen swept out of town, a short forty yards behind the fleeing Matt Hurst.

Lily felt a cold touch of fear in her spine. She knew abruptly that if her plan failed, then Matt Hurst's blood would be on her hands.

She was thinking, too, that the sheriff was in love with Elaine, thinking that he would not be inclined to believe Matt's story that Elaine had deliberately lied about his attacking her. She was aware as well that Matt, knowing his own innocence, would rely too much on his ability to convince others of it.

Yet she knew the men of this country. And she knew that not one of them would consent to a hanging if a woman were present.

She broke abruptly away from the hotel veranda, and lifting her skirts, ran swiftly as she could toward the stable. Si Van Ness firmly and stubbornly refused to catch and saddle her horse until all of the men waiting were mounted and gone. Lily was forced to wait helplessly, fuming.

At last her horse was ready, and although she was wearing a full, long skirt, Lily mounted astride.

She was not much of a rider, and her horse was old and patient. Lily had no spurs, but a small quirt which she had never used hung from her saddle-horn. She took it down and belabored the old horse's rump until he lifted resentfully into a half-hearted trot.

The miles dropped behind with agonizing slowness. Tears of helpless frustration welled up into Lily's blue eyes and ran across her cheeks unheeded. "Oh, God," she prayed. "Let me get there in time. Let me get there in time."

She thought of the short time she had known Matt Hurst, and of how much he had come to mean to her. She knew that in Matt was a great capacity for living, for laughing, for loving.

She wondered if his feelings toward her were the same as hers toward him. Perhaps he had only felt a normal man's hunger for a woman, and perhaps that explained his taking her in his arms, his kissing her.

The thought depressed her, and again she began to quirt her horse. She had to beat them to Matt. She had to.

She almost passed the turnoff that went in to Tillman's place, but reined in abruptly and whirled around as a call came to her from a dry wash off from the road.

"Lily! Turn that horse around and get back into town. They'll be here any minute."

LILY started to protest, but hardly had she uttered a half dozen words when she heard the confused, distant shouts of the posse.

She heard Matt's urgent shout, "Distract them for just a minute. Stop them here at the forks. Then you get back into town."

She had no time to answer that, for they were upon her, pulling their plunging horses to a sliding halt. Lily raised her hand.

The sheriff scowled at her and growled irritably, "What are you doing away out here, Miss Kibben? Don't you know Matt Hurst is somewheres around?" He turned to his posse. "Samuels, ride in to town with her. See she gits there safe."

For an instant there was silence. It was broken by Matt's cold, clipped voice from the draw, "Don't a damned one of you stir a hair. I've got a rifle here and I'll use it, make no mistake about that."

Someone in the group stirred, and the rifle barked. Matt said sharply, "Think I'm

fooling? The next bullet will kill someone."

The sheriff growled, "Careful, boys. Do as he says. Any man that would—"

Matt snarled, "Shut up."

Judge Fisher asked. "What's the idea. Hurst? What do you want?"

"I want you to look at something. You and the sheriff. The rest of you stay put."

Fisher shrugged wearily. "I suppose you want us to believe you never touched Miss Tillman."

"Exactly that. Lily, take the sheriff and the judge and circle around to Tillman's lane. Pick up Elaine's tracks in the snow and follow them here to the main road."

"What'll that prove?"

Matt said, "It will prove that I was never closer than ten feet to Elaine except at the time she cut my cinch latigo. You'll find her hairpins and the buttons from her coat lying there at the fork and not a damned track but hers anywhere around." Matt permitted himself a faint, sour grin. "I'm a slick article, Judge, but not slick enough to attack a woman without my tracks mixin' with hers. Go on, take a look."

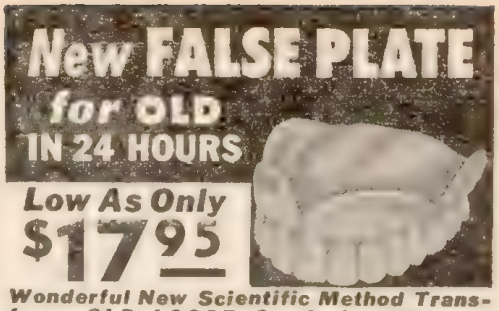
Judge Fisher reined his horse over and crossed to the Tillman lane. With his eyes on the ground, with the sheriff and Lily following him, he traced Elaine's tracks to the main road, careful not to cross or foul any of them with his own.

When he looked up, he said, "Elaine Tillman lied. Tracks say Matt's telling the truth."

There was a sudden, swelling murmur from the packed group of men. The judge yelled, "All right. Any of you that want to, come on over here and look for yourselves. Careful, though. I don't want these tracks messed up."

A man in the crowd said plaintively, "Now why'n hell would a woman do a thing like that?"

And the sheriff replied, his voice faint and weak, "I reckon she done it to save Dell."



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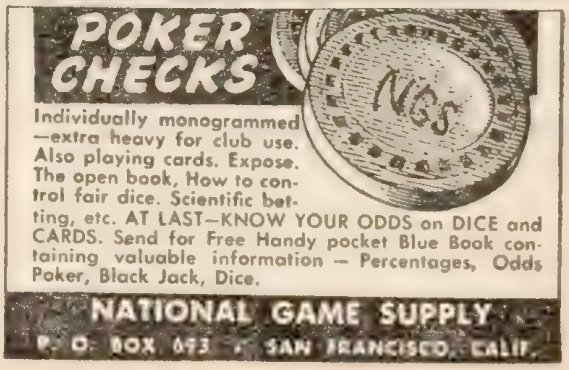
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Lily felt tears of pure relief welling up into her eyes. Still holding the rifle cautiously, Matt climbed up out of the wash. He looked directly at the sheriff and said harshly, "You've got Dell Tillman. You've got his confession and two witnesses to back it up. What are you going to do about it?"

The sheriff said, "I'll bring Tillman in," but Lily knew he was lying. There was a shiftiness about the sheriff's eyes that betrayed him. Lily looked at the man and felt a reluctant pity. Alf Polk was in a squeeze, all right. He was desperately in love with Elaine. He had probably talked to Elaine before leaving town, and Lily guessed she had put the same price on herself for Alf that she had for Matt, that price being Dell's freedom.

It was a price Alf was prepared to pay. The shiftiness of his eyes told Lily that. The sheriff turned toward the posse. "Go on back to town. I won't need any help to bring in Tillman."

That was apparently the final tip-off to Matt, if one had been needed. He walked over to the wash and got his horse. He rode back and looked at Lily with warmth in his eyes. "Go with them. I'll see you later."

"What are you going to do?"

"I've got to see Kip. And Lily?"

"What, Matt?"

"I owe you more than I can ever pay. I owe you my life."

She was wordless, but her eyes told him many things. Her eyes promised him the world if he came back to her. And her eyes told him that she knew what he intended to do, but her lips were silent.

Her smile was light, perhaps a little sad, for she knew he was going into worse danger now than any before.

Matt wheeled his horse and rode away at a gallop. He turned at the crest and looked back. Lily had not moved. She was watching him, and she lifted a hand in farewell as he rode down the slope and dropped from sight.

RIDING out, he had pointed his horse toward Rocking H. But as soon as he dropped out of sight, he veered away from that course and took a direct one toward Tillman's DT.

Three miles lay between the turnoff and Tillman's ranch. Matt covered them in less than twenty-minutes.

He rode in openly, and his eyes were quick to spot the horses, sweated and unsaddled, which had been turned into the corral to cool.

Matt rode up to the bunkhouse and quickly swung down from his horse. He called, "Olaf!"

Olaf Skjerik came to the door, hulking, blond, cold as ice and scowling.

Matt said, "Call out your crew."

"Get the hell out of here, before somethin' happens to you. I still remember that clout you gave me on the neck."

"You'll get more than that before I'm through."

Olaf started toward him, and the crew came pouring out of the bunkhouse behind Olaf.

Matt said sharply, "Hold it!"

There was that in his stance, and in his expression that stopped Olaf as though he had walked into a wall. He looked disturbed for a moment, then gathered himself for a rush.

Matt said evenly, "The jig's up, Olaf. Tillman's confessed to the sheriff that you and he murdered Dan and my brothers. He's confessed that they weren't moving DT stock but their own. Somebody saw what happened that day. Kip Reynolds was along."

He grinned at Olaf's open-mouthed amazement, fully aware that when the big foreman recovered from it he'd be as dangerous as a grizzly bear.

Matt went on, "Joe Furness got a look at some of the brands that day. And you told Joe you'd kill him if he told, didn't you? Well you won't be killing anyone, Olaf. Because you'll be in jail. And when

you are, then Joe will tell what he knows."

Behind Olaf he noticed Joe Furness slipping furtively away, and let him go because this suited his purpose.

He said, "The other two will probably be let off pretty easy. They thought what they were doing was on the level, if not quite legal. But you knew better."

Olaf's mouth snapped shut, and his eyes glittered. His huge body seemed to go tense and still. Matt said swiftly, "The rest of you stay out of this and you'll be all right. Olaf's figuring on making a play. He knows he's hooked. Stay out of it, hear?"

Matt knew his own skill with a gun. He knew himself to be fairly fast. He knew as well that Olaf Skjerik, for all his bulk, was supposed to have a lightning draw. It was probably what Tillman had hired him for.

Behind Olaf, Tillman's crew scrambled aside, leaving open space behind the foreman. To right and left they scattered, and Matt knew that unless they stayed neutral, he was finished.

But he faced this as he had faced everything else since he had alighted from the train at Granada—with fatalistic unconcern. Whatever the outcome of this battle, he had won. He clung to that belief. He had won vengeance for Dan and Frankie and Will, and he had cleared the Hurst name.

But remembering Lily Kibben, he knew he did not want to die.

Olaf fell into a half-crouch, his hand but an inch from the butt of his gun.

MATT glued his eyes to the foreman's, and waited. The waiting grew long and intolerable and at last he said hoarsely, "Scared, Olaf? You've got guts enough to hang an innocent man, but have you got guts enough to face one who can shoot back?"

Olaf's face twitched. And Matt heard the slightest of movements behind him and off to one side, toward the house.

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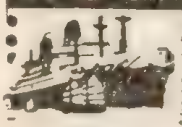

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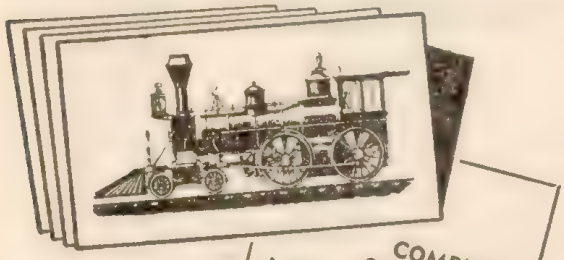

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He felt cold sweat break over his body. He dared not turn his head for even a lightning glance. Then he heard Tillman's choked, painful laugh. Saw Olaf's cruel expression of triumph.

Matt said, never taking his eyes from Olaf's face, "How did you get away from Rocking H, Dell? Didn't Alf leave a guard over you?"

Tillman chuckled, though the sound was filled with pain. Tillman said thickly, "Only Kip. He got careless and I slugged him."

There was a momentary silence. Matt's hands were sweating and he knew the palms would be slick as he grabbed for his gun. But he dared not try to wipe them on the sides of his pants. He dared not move those hands. For when he did, bullets would come at him.

Tillman growled, "Take him, Olaf!"

Olaf's hand sped for his gun. It cleared leather, the hammer coming back.

As though from far away, Matt heard a scream—a woman's scream. But there was no time for thought of anything but this. No time to look up, no time to be surprised or even to think.

A man's movements became automatic under the prod of mortal danger. Matt realized that his gun was in his hand without quite remembering how it got there. On the heels of the *click* of Olaf's gunhammer came that of Matt's. And quickly following that, Tillman's, unseen off there to Matt's side.

Matt's gun bucked against his palm, and Olaf's shot came like an echo. Matt felt a savage blow in his thigh. It was as though a horse had kicked it out from under him. He drove backward, falling, and at that precise instant, Tillman's gun spoke, the bullet cutting air where Matt had stood but a split second before.

Rolling, forgetting Olaf for the moment, Matt brought his gun from beneath his body and snapped a swift shot at Tillman's crouching form.

Tillman never got off a second shot. He dropped his gun and clawed at his throat an instant before he collapsed.

Matt heard the woman's screaming plainer now. He forced himself up to a sitting position and looked back at Olaf.

The foreman stood solidly on his feet, his gun smoking in his hand. But he didn't fire again. He stood that way for what seemed an eternity, and at last began to sway like a giant pine in a gale.

A red spot on his shirt-front began to spread. Matt struggled up to his knees, sick and dizzy with the pain in his thigh. He felt the softness of Lily as she crouched beside him, unmindful of the danger that yet lurked in Olaf Skjerik's gun.

Matt started to push her away, stopped as he saw Olaf collapse onto the hard-packed snow. He turned a little, realizing that her arms were around him, that her tear-dampened face was pressed very close against his own.

He kept saying over and over, "Lily, I told you to go to town. I told you to go to town."

He tasted her lips, salty with tears but unbelievably sweet for all of that. When she could speak, she murmured shakily, "Matt, I belong with you. I belong with you."

He murmured, "Yes," but it took her second kiss to convince him that he was not delirious, that he wasn't dreaming this. The pain of the flesh-wound in his thigh disappeared and he felt as though he were ten feet tall. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

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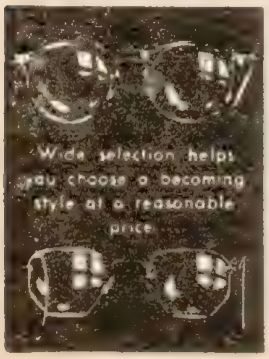

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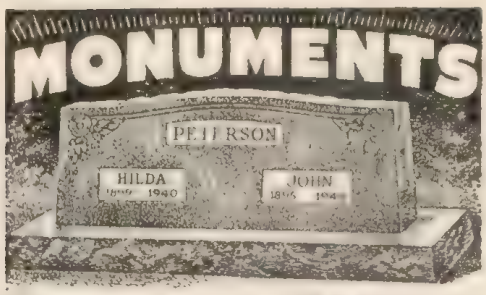

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LE ROY BOYD

(Continued from page 62)

After all, there was no more need for it. Sheriff Clem Crosby was there. Having just got back to town, the gunfire had brought him to the saloon.

"Hurt, boy?" he asked Mel.

He saw Mel still on his feet, and that was answer enough. The sheriff turned his attention to Bradley. "Well, Ace," he said. "Reckon you know what this means. After what Shorty just said."

The doctor was there then. He glanced at Mel and grunted. "Thought I told you to take it easy."

"We will from now on," Lumpy said. "Ain't going to be no more trouble, and I'm taking him back to Mrs. Brown's "

In reply to Lumpy's inquiry, the medico promised to stop around there later. He stooped for a look at Bradley.

What Lumpy had said about there being no more trouble kept turning in Mel's mind. The town would know now who had been the cause of Frank Lonigan's death. He could go out there to the ranch. But there was still one more matter.

He found the answer to that, though, when he and Lumpy made their way out of the saloon. Nora and Mrs. Brown were at the bank corner, and when Nora caught sight of them, she came running.

"Mel!" she cried. "You all right?"

He peered at her. Her tears glistened in the light from a window. Though pain was dragging like a leaden weight at his body, he grinned.

"Feel fine," he mumbled.

She was sobbing something. He heard only snatches of it, though, for already he was thinking of what he and she would do to make the Circle-8 the finest ranch in the country.

Frank Lonigan had made no mistake down there at Tasajera when he'd taken on a partner. If he'd been able to read character in a man, he'd also known his daughter could do the same. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

(Continued from page 77)

He waited. In a moment the door opened. He smiled thinly. The kid was that much of a fool; he knew he would be. Standing there in the light, a perfect target. His finger tightened on the trigger; he squinted along the dark rifle barrel. The kid stood without moving. Colton brought his head up again. The woman would be in the back of the cabin, he knew, wondering and afraid. His smile widened and twisted into a frown. *One shot,* he thought, *one shot and I'll send her into the loneliness she deserves.*

He closed one eye and found the kid's figure in the blurred sights. He held his breath, and felt the blood beating savagely against his temples. His finger was cold and stiff on the trigger. The kid seemed far away now, too far away for a shot. Suddenly he didn't know the kid. He dropped his head into the snow, trying to think of why he was here. This kid, and the girl, what did they mean to him? They were like something a long time ago, five years ago, and now almost forgotten. He got slowly up, throwing one glance back toward the cabin. Then he moved to the pony.

When he dropped back over the rise, he could hear the kid's faint calling, "Who's that?" The sound drifted through the trees and was quickly lost to him. He turned the mare up the long slope.

Ice had begun to settle on his face, and it seemed to crackle when he smiled. He couldn't keep from smiling, though; what a fool stunt this had been. Five years of waiting, and then this. Even so, there had been some use in it. Earhart was dead, even if the kid would never know about it. And the kid was a fool. He thought of him standing there in the light of the warm cabin. That kid had a long way to go, he thought sadly. Still, he'll get no more trouble from me. Not from Lute Colton. Not any more. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

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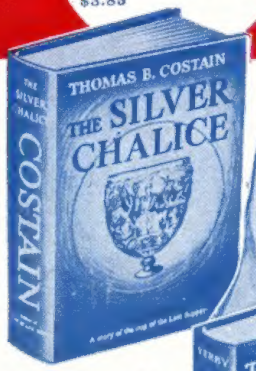

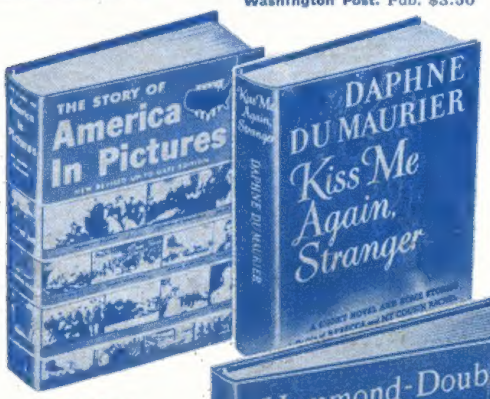

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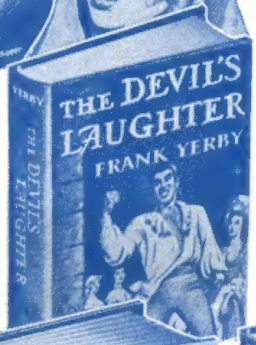

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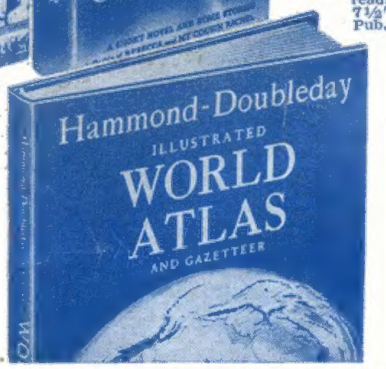

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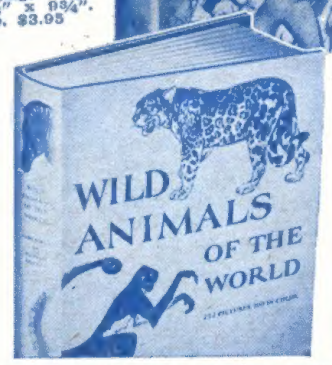

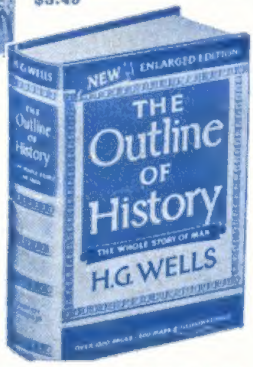

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